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NIGEL'S
VOCATION

BY
WE
NORRIS

g. w.

1910

NIGEL'S VOCATION

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

A DEPLORABLE AFFAIR

JACK'S FATHER

MATTHEW AUSTEN

HIS GRACE

THE DESPOTIC LADY

CLARISSA FURIOSA

GILES INGILBY

THE EMBARRASSING ORPHAN

THE CREDIT OF THE COUNTY

LORD LEONARD THE LUCKLESS

NIGEL'S VOCATION

BY

W. E. NORRIS

METHUEN & CO.

36 ESSEX STREET W.C.

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NIGEL'S VOCATION

CHAPTER I

BROTHER ANSELM

BROTHER ANSELM drove his hoe into the soft ground, relinquished his grip of it for a moment, and sighed somewhat wearily, although he was not tired, in a physical sense, by a long day's work at trenching, manuring and clearing away the weeds, which a spell of mild spring weather had brought to the surface in thousands. That season of the year, as everybody knows, is wont to produce stir and unrest throughout the realm of creation, including its lords, and even monks, whose whole life is a defiance of natural laws, must not expect to be altogether exempt from the operation of these. But Brother Anselm, after a sojourn of two years within the sheltering, excluding walls of Lew Abbey, was not yet a monk, nor had it yet been intimated to him that the period of his novitiate was drawing towards the close for which his soul thirsted. It was, indeed, on that account that he sighed, not—as a casual spectator might have surmised—because he was young, because it was fine, warm weather, because the world is wide and because death in life is, after all, repugnant to the inborn instincts of humanity. Brother

Anselm had seen a little of the world, and had tasted enough of its pleasures and temptations to dread them as his deadliest foes ; all he asked now was to be allowed to take final vows, priest's vows, and—thus inexpugnably protected—to work his way, by the grace and mercy of God, to those eternal joys which cannot deceive or disappoint.

However, it must be confessed that his appearance would have impressed the casual spectator as being rather that of a young man who had missed his way than of a destined ascetic. Tall, handsome, well-proportioned, with great, restless brown eyes beneath arched brows, a slightly pointed chin and a mobile, sensitive, full-lipped mouth, he looked as though to him Fate had assigned *primis et venerem et proelia*. It is true that, owing to an indefinable suggestion of weakness and excitability in his comely countenance, he also looked as though Mars and Venus might have found him a difficult votary to reward with success. But what had he, in his rough, black Benedictine habit (the skirts of which he had tucked into his girdle, while his loose sleeves, flung back, displayed a pair of thin, muscular arms), to do with false heathen deities and their nominally abandoned cult ? The ancient grey abbey behind him, restored and reinhabited after centuries of disuse, and looking down upon the rich, pleasant western country, of which the community now owned some fifty acres or so, was the symbol of their final overthrow—perhaps, too, the symbol of final victory over an evil, sensual world by the patient, self-denying army in the ranks of which he was a recruit. His trouble was that he was still only a recruit, still upon his trial, still reminded by constant mortifications, reproofs, penances, that his submission was not recognised for the complete, unchangeable fact that his heart knew it to be.

His heart gave a great leap when an old lay brother, with a long white beard, came stepping carefully across the freshly dug beds of the vegetable garden to announce that his presence was required by the Lord Abbot. Such a summons was not usual ; what could it portend ? Might it not be that at this happy Eastertide and on the conclusion of the long Lenten fast, wherein he had not incurred many rebukes, it had at length been decided to give him hope ? Hitherto the Abbot had been chary of words, chary of encouragement ; if he was about to speak now, surely it would be to say something definite ! But Brother Anselm, taught by experience, asked no questions. A few strides brought him within the building, and as he hurried along bare, echoing corridors, he struggled, as he had so often struggled before, to bring that tell-tale visage of his under control, for well he knew that any display of emotion would be instantly noted and disapproved of by the ever-vigilant eyes that surrounded him.

He was conscious of a preliminary inward thrill of emotion, in the shape of disappointment, on learning that he was wanted in the room set apart for the reception of visitors. That did not sound promising. Yet, who knew ? The Bishop might, perhaps, have arrived unexpectedly—or the Bishop's coadjutor. It was not impossible that his case was being made the subject of consultation. He entered hastily, genuflected to the Abbot, and with a quick side-glance, while he stood meekly awaiting orders, perceived that the two persons from whom he was separated by a bare table were not ecclesiastics. The Abbot, a clean-shaven, emaciated, hairless old man, with a kind face and sunken blue eyes, made a slight motion with his hand towards one of these, but did not speak. The stranger rose slowly. He was big, gaunt, somewhat round-shouldered, and

had a hook nose, a long upper lip, and iron-grey hair Brother Anselm noticed. He said—

"You do not know me, Nigel, although I presume that you must have heard of me. I am your uncle Robert."

Nigel Scarth, whose name in religion was Brother Anselm, made a gesture of assent, smiling faintly. He had often heard of his two uncles—Thomas, the wealthy owner of Rixmouth Castle, in Yorkshire, and Robert, scarcely less wealthy, who dwelt in the same county, but had heard nothing flattering about either of them, as the latter appeared to divine, for he went on, in a harsh, aggressive tone of voice—

"I cannot hold myself in any way to blame for the circumstance of our not having met before. Your late father, my brother Francis, was—but no matter! I do not care to speak ill of the dead."

He paused, frowning heavily and looking down at the table, upon which his long, lean hands rested, while his companion judged the moment appropriate to break in cheerfully with—

"Well, Mr. Nigel, we at all events have met before, though I daresay you don't remember me."

"I remember you perfectly, Mr. Linklater," replied the young man, in whose memory the figure of the rotund, rosy-cheeked family lawyer was associated with sundry bygone interviews and earnest remonstrances against the squandering of his small patrimony. He had always rather liked little Mr. Linklater, if he had refused to be guided by his advice; still, it gave him no sort of pleasure to see the lawyer at Lew Abbey. What could his errand possibly be? To place difficulties in the postulant's path by a relation of scandals and escapades which belonged to the abjured past? But that apprehension was dismissed almost as soon as formed. In

the first place, such a proceeding would not be worth Mr. Linklater's while, and in the second, he could tell nothing that had not already been confessed to the Lord Abbot without reserve. For the rest, the nature of Robert Scarth's and Mr. Linklater's joint errand was speedily made known by the former, who now resumed—

"We are here as executors of my brother Thomas. You have not, I understand, been informed of his death?"

The young man shook his head. "We do not hear much of what happens in the world," said he.

"I suppose not. Well, we have had the—er—misfortune to lose my brother Thomas, and he has left a will, to which, whatever I may think of its wisdom or folly, it devolves upon me to give effect. I must ask you to give your close attention to the provisions of that will, which are numerous, complicated and—and perhaps I am justified in adding vexatious."

"Oh, you may call them that," chimed in Mr. Linklater briskly; "I take it that they were meant to be that. But they are not so complicated as to be at all unintelligible. You would like me, I dare say, just to state what they are as briefly and clearly as I can."

"If you please," answered Mr. Scarth, and resumed his seat.

The Abbot, who all this time had remained motionless, his chin supported upon his folded hands, made a slight sign to the young man, who obediently took one of the few wooden chairs which stood against the white-washed wall, and Mr. Linklater, putting on his spectacles, produced a sheaf of documents.

"I have a copy of your late uncle's will here, Mr. Nigel," he began; "but I don't propose to puzzle you by reading it at full length. Let me rather say at once that under it you take—subject to certain restrictions and conditions—a life interest both in his landed estates

and in the greater part of the income arising out of his personal property."

The young man could not repress a start, and the lawyer held up a warning finger.

"Ah, but wait a bit! the conditions may not be such as you will be disposed to accept. In the first place, you will, of course, have to quit your monastery and assume the usual life and duties of a country gentleman; secondly, the property will, on your death, only pass to the heir male of your body in the event of his not being a Roman Catholic; thirdly, your own life interest will at once terminate, should you at any future time become a monk. Under certain circumstances, you are given power to nominate your successor; only he must not be of your faith. You are to be allowed a month from now in which to make up your mind; and that, I believe, sums up the situation, so far as you are concerned."

A slight flush had mounted to the novice's cheekbones. He glanced appealingly at the Abbot, who did not stir and preserved an impassive mien; then he turned his eyes towards Mr. Linklater, who looked rather amused, and his uncle Robert, who frowned impatiently. Nobody, it appeared, intended to help him.

"I have been taken completely by surprise," he faltered at length; "it never in my life occurred to me that such a thing as this could happen. I do not want to be rich, I do not want to return to the world; I—I do not see that it can be my duty to accept this inheritance."

"Well," observed Mr. Linklater tolerantly, "that's a question for you to decide, and, as I tell you, no decision is obligatory until the end of the next four weeks."

"May I ask what will become of the estates and property if I refuse?"

"In that case everything goes to some person nominated by Mr. Robert Scarth, provided that such person be not either a son of his own or a member of the Church of Rome."

"It pleased my late brother," interposed Robert Scarth suddenly, "to put that additional and rather superfluous affront upon me."

"Oh, well," observed the lawyer, laughing, "it pleased poor Tom to do a good many odd things. Appointing me as his executor, for one, and drawing up his will with his own hand, instead of employing me, for another. It is an eccentric will, and perhaps, if anybody chooses to call it so, a malicious one——"

"I choose to call it so," broke in Mr. Robert Scarth.

"Yes; but, as I was going to say, it is not, in spite of some irregularities, the sort of will which could be disputed with any chance of success in these days, when effect is always given to the manifest wishes of the testator. Otherwise, my dear Robert, I am quite sure you would dispute it."

"I do not know what right you have to say such a thing as that, Linklater!" cried the other angrily.

But Mr. Linklater, who was a very old friend of the family, only laughed again.

"Come, Robert! have you ever in all your days denied yourself the luxury of going to law, except when I have held you back by main force? But we are digressing; and we have already, I am afraid, trespassed rather longer than we should have done upon his lordship's time and patience. I ought, perhaps, just to mention that there are a few points with regard to which the will strikes me as ambiguous; still, I believe I am safe in saying that, should Mr. Nigel decide to comply with the conditions laid down, horses, furniture, carriages, plate and so forth will become his absolutely, and that

no subsequent claim can be made against him in respect of these. Similarly, if we suppose the case of his reverting at some future time to monastic life, he could not be called upon to refund any sums that he might have saved out of income in the meanwhile. Such considerations may weigh with him; so it is only fair to allude to them. Now, unless you have any further questions that you would like to put to me, Mr. Nigel——”

As Brother Anselm shook his head, both the lawyer and Mr. Scarth got up. The Abbot also rose, and, opening his lips for the first time, said, in a high, thin voice—

“You may withdraw, my son.”

The young man was silently preparing to obey when his uncle stopped him.

“One moment, Nigel! It may occur to you that I ought, in the natural course of things, to be my brother Thomas's heir, and that some injustice has been done to me. That is, I think, true; but the circumstance need not influence you, for you must bear in mind that, whether Rixmouth passes into your possession or not, it can never pass into mine or into that of my children. Let me add that, should you become our neighbour, we shall endeavour to do our duty to you as neighbours and relations. Goodbye.”

He held out his hand, which Nigel took, and then Mr. Linklater, whose hand was also outstretched said—

“As soon as you have made up your mind, you know, you can tell his lordship here, who has kindly promised to communicate with us. If I might venture to offer a word of advice, I should say don't be in a hurry. It's a clear fifteen thousand a year, which you can take now and surrender at any future moment if

you choose. On the other hand, you won't be able to surrender it now and take it afterwards. I only remind you of this because I can see that your present disposition is to treat the whole thing as a temptation of the devil."

The old lawyer was perhaps something of a physiognomist; at any rate, he could not have gauged Nigel Scarth's mental condition with greater accuracy. Upon that would-be recluse the sudden offer of what would once have seemed to him almost miraculous good fortune produced the effect of a trial which, although no longer seductive, must needs be fraught with some peril to his soul. With perfect truth he had stated that he did not want to be rich and did not want to return to the world; the question was whether allegiance to the Church into which he had been received did not render it incumbent upon him to accept revenues from which that Church might at least derive temporal benefit. The Abbot's silence had appeared to convey a hint that such might be the Abbot's view. For his own part, he longed to cry out "No!" and have done with it. How could he trust himself? How could he possibly wish to renew a conflict in which he had already been signally worsted and to sacrifice the peace of mind to which, after two years of probation, of difficulty, and of occasional revolt, he had attained? His natural character, as he well knew, was an erratic one; his passions were stronger than his will; his love for what was high and noble in the abstract was only too apt to be obscured by gusts and storms of desire for mere earthly joys; only through supernatural aid, fortified by the authority, austerities and mortifications of monastic life, could he hope to keep himself unspotted from the world. Nigel Scarth had always been like that, even in his irreligious, unregenerate days—had always seen better things with

approving eyes, while following worse ; always repented of sin before reverting to it and then repenting once more. Into the bosom of the Church of Rome, as into his sole haven of refuge, he had flung himself shortly after taking his degree at Oxford, and even so he had soon found that he could not, while a layman, feel safe. But he was safe at Lew Abbey, and when once a priest he would, without doubt, be safe for ever.

Truth to tell, his unregenerate days, if frankly irreligious, had not been so very full of iniquity as he imagined. He had been much like other young men—a little wilder than the average young man, perhaps—he had got into the usual scrapes and had thrown away a great deal of money and had failed, through idleness, to pass any of the requisite examinations which might have opened a career for him. It may be that he had it in him, and was conscious of having it in him, to develope into a desperate miscreant ; but in reality he had turned out no worse than was to be anticipated, considering what his training and home associations had been. For his mother had died in his infancy, and his father, Francis Scarth, the black sheep of a highly respectable family, had certainly not set the boy a bright example. Francis had had most vices, with the exception of avarice, and had practised them in the thorough-going style characteristic of his race. Quarrelsome, like all the Scarths, he had broken off relations with his brothers for many years, and lived mostly in London, where he had achieved a certain notoriety as a giver of dinners and still more as an inveterate gambler. In his paternal capacity he had been indulgent, if scarcely affectionate ; but he had never exercised, or tried to exercise, the least influence over his only son, and the latter's extravagance, for which he was himself more or less directly to blame,

had been resented by him as gross ingratitude. His sudden death had left Nigel with a very small fortune and without, it must be confessed, any keen sense of loss. It had not taken the young man long to run through his diminished patrimony, nor had the process, now that he looked back upon it, been at all an enjoyable one.

"God forbid," he muttered, with an apprehensive shudder, "that I should ever make a fool and a beast of myself like that again!"

But God does not forbid us to make fools and beasts of ourselves, if we be so minded. We are free to choose, and many of us, through some lack of moral muscle and sinew, are apt to choose ill with our eyes open. This was what Brother Anselm pleaded to the Abbot when, after three days of undisturbed reflection and self-examination, he was accorded an interview.

"Can it," he asked, "be my duty to step into temptation's way?"

"My son," answered the Abbot, "temptations are sent to us to be resisted and conquered, not to be shirked. Moreover, I will tell you frankly that I am not persuaded of your vocation."

Nigel heaved a long sigh. "What would persuade you, father?" he asked.

The Abbot smiled. "You have been obedient," he answered, "though obedience has not come easily to you. You have zeal and fervour; I would fain believe that you have been sufficiently tried. But that is not my belief. Why, for instance, does this chance of returning to the world agitate you so much? Is it not because you have a secret longing—I do not say that it is a blameworthy one—to return to the world?"

Nigel was upon the point of answering with a vehement denial; but the faded blue eyes of that mild

old man, which had, on more than one previous occasion, pierced the innermost recesses of his soul, gave him pause, and, with another long sigh—

"Won't you raise a finger to save me from danger, father?" he implored.

The Abbot shook his head. "I will say no more to you, my son, than this: you may honourably accept and you may honourably decline; only you must be sure that your motive for doing the one or the other is the right motive. You must not refuse out of cowardice, nor must you accept for the sake of self-indulgence."

"If I were to accept," the young man declared, "it would be for the sake of the Church."

"As a Catholic layman, leading a good life, you could unquestionably serve the Church well. In the way of money you would be able to do little, for you would, of course, marry, and you would be obliged to make provision for your children out of income. The interests of the Church are less concerned in this matter than your own."

"Then I shall refuse, father!"

"So be it, my son. We shall rejoice to keep you with us, just as we should rejoice to welcome you back, should you, at any future time, return to us."

The young man clutched eagerly at that assurance. "You would receive me again, father, if—if I were to find the world, the flesh and the devil too powerful for me?"

"Undoubtedly. However, I have a higher opinion of your courage than you have."

"But not of my vocation?"

"It is uncertain; it may yet require to be tested by means which we cannot employ within these walls. You must have patience."

The young man knitted his brows and twisted his long, interlaced fingers together, breathing quickly.

"Father," he burst out, "you wish me to accept!"

"I do not wish you to accept," answered the Abbot, smiling; "but I am sure that you will accept unless I forbid you, my son, and I cannot take the responsibility of forbidding you."

CHAPTER II

MISS MONICA

THE typical April day, which deluged the asphalté of the Paris streets with sudden showers, only to make them bright and dazzling with bursts of warm sunshine, accorded aptly enough with Monica Fer-rand's mood. The time had come for her to quit the convent where she had been so happy, and where everybody had been so good to her ; and, although long ago fixed, as well as sometimes wished for, seemed to have come almost abruptly at last. So the joy of having done for ever with lessons and schooling was somewhat damped by the thought of leaving friends with whom she could scarcely hope to be brought into intimate relations again, and she could not refrain from shedding tears in the parlour of the Mother Superioress, whither she had been summoned to receive some last words of counsel and goodwill. For this the placid, rosy-cheeked old woman rebuked her gently.

"Come, my child, saying farewell is sad, and we shall be grieved to part with you ; but it is no such great misfortune, *voyons*, to return to one's own home, and your father will not be flattered if you welcome him with red eyes."

Monica nodded, smiled and thrust her handkerchief resolutely into her pocket. She had always been a docile little person, always ready to obey orders, and

had given no anxiety to those placed in authority over her during an educational period of four years.

"It is that I am rather afraid, *ma mère*," she explained apologetically.

"Of what, then? Not of your father, I hope? One has only to read his letters to see that he is full of kindness and affection and indulgence for you. Your position, I admit, will at first be strange and difficult—especially in England, where young girls are allowed to take the lead in a way which would not be thought desirable here—but you will have your sisters, who are married women and much older than yourself, to advise and direct you. Oh no, my child! you do not do well to be afraid."

The Reverend Mother might perhaps have spoken less confidently had she known a little more than she did about the elder sisters to whose guidance she commended her pupil. She knew, however, that they were great ladies, that they belonged to an ancient Catholic family, and that, during occasional flying visits to Paris, they had displayed a kindly interest in Monica, the child of their father's old age, who was destined to keep house for him at Lannowe on his return from India, where he had for some years past held an important official post. She surmised also that that period of ruling a large establishment, for which Monica did not seem to be particularly well qualified, was unlikely to last long. The girl would, of course, marry, and a suitable match would doubtless be arranged for her.

That indeed was very much what Monica herself, with her French training, anticipated; only the plunge which she was about to take into the unknown made her shiver, both because it was a plunge and because she could not but fear that she might disappoint her father and her sisters. For she was, and always had

been, the ugly duckling in a brood renowned for beauty. Not that she was really plain—since she had the Ferrand grace and air of breeding, the exquisite Ferrand complexion and the large blue-grey eyes, shaded by long, curved lashes, which are the especial distinction of that race—but the mould which had, once upon a time, turned out a Duchess of Leith, a Lady Bracebridge and a Mrs. Maltby appeared, in her belated case, to have lost sharpness of outline, and her features, with the exception of the eyes above mentioned, were somewhat insignificant. Her mother, as she well remembered, had pronounced her a failure, and her looking-glass confirmed the maternal verdict. She had always been much in awe of her mother, that tall, handsome, supercilious lady of whom she had seen so little, and who had died out in India almost immediately after Lord Lannowe had taken up his appointment there. Of her father, who also was a rather indistinct memory to her, she had not been in awe, and it was true that he had written kindly and affectionately ; still, the chances were that, on calling to claim her—which he might now be expected to do at any moment—his impression of his youngest daughter would be that she did the family no credit in respect of looks. Therefore it was that the colour forsook her cheeks and her heart thumped against her ribs when the door was thrown open to admit an elderly gentleman of benevolent aspect, with curly grey hair and a closely trimmed white beard, who took the Mother Superior's hand, bent low over it and expressed, in a few well-turned phrases, his thanks for the *soins vraiment maternels* which had been bestowed upon his child.

“And so this is my little Monica,” he went on, kissing the girl's cheek and leaving one hand upon her shoulder, which he patted while he talked. “Ah, how

the years slip by ! It seems but yesterday that she was cutting her teeth and making a terrible noise about it ! Well, my dear, I am very glad to be back with you, and I hope you are not altogether sorry to have me back."

"*Elle est un peu émue, milor ; elle s'exprimera plus convenablement tout à l'heure,*" the Mother Superior hastened to interpose, perceiving that a watery smile was all Monica could accomplish by way of response.

The conversation was carried on in French, which Lord Lannowe spoke fluently, if with a pronounced Britannic accent. He chatted on for a few minutes, giving his daughter time to recover herself. He did not seem to be disappointed either with her appearance or with her manners. He walked to the window and kept his back turned while she was taking leave of the kind old woman who had so long stood in the place of parents to her. But when the parting was over, and when he was driving away with her in a hired carriage through the wet, glittering streets, he said cheerily, in his own language—

"So there's an end of conventual discipline, and the time has come to enjoy youth while it lasts. It don't last long, my dear, I can assure you ; you had better make the most of it. Well, how would you like to begin ? Shops, eh ?"

He took her hand and gave it a little squeeze, which comforted her even more than his beaming face and his friendly words. She confessed, with a shy laugh, that she would rather like to do some shopping, only she hadn't any money.

"Bless your soul, I've got lots of money ! What's the use of being banished for four years if one doesn't fill one's pocket by it ?" cried Lord Lannowe, who had never had lots of money in his life, nor ever failed to spend every shilling that he could lay hands upon.

"Don't hesitate to order all you want. I suppose you really haven't any frocks or hats or things, have you? And then for the evening—how about doing a theatre?"

He was so simple and so young, notwithstanding his white hair, that Monica was encouraged to confide timidly to him what she would really enjoy. Her secret wish, it appeared, was to go to the circus. A friend and former school-companion of hers, now out in the world, had described to her the wonders to be beheld there in terms which had fired her imagination, and, if she might be allowed to choose, she would very much prefer it to the theatre.

"Her father laughed. "Between you and me, my dear, so should I. We can't escape the *Français* to-night, though, I'm afraid, for I've taken a box there, and Ned Gervase promised to look in upon us in the course of the evening. Do you remember him, I wonder? No; I suppose you wouldn't. Good fellow, Gervase—rather solemn, perhaps, but a good fellow all the same. Well, as I say, I decided upon the *Français* because it was the only theatre that seemed—er—possible. But never mind, we'll go to the circus to-morrow. What is the name of your friend who recommended it? Sensible sort of girl, I should think. Anyhow, her tastes and mine seem to agree."

Monica was delighted to hear him say that, for she had been wondering how she should find an opportunity of mentioning to him how eager she was to make him acquainted with Ethel Dallison, the beautiful, accomplished and attractive being whom all the inmates of the convent, save its head, had regarded with admiring envy, and by whom it had been her personal privilege to be singled out for intimacy. She said breathlessly—

"I am sure you would love Ethel! She is so pretty and so clever and—and so irresistible!"

"I am afraid," answered Lord Lannowe, "that I am a little bit too old to love people for such reasons, though I don't deny that they are good reasons. You want me, I suppose, to call upon her people. Well, since she is a friend of yours, I shall be charmed to do so, provided, of course, that her people are decent."

"Oh, but naturally they are!" cried Monica, much impressed by the quick intuition which had enabled her father to forestall a coming request. "Major and Mrs. Dallison are not rich, Ethel says, but they are quite *bien vus*, and they go out a great deal." She added, with a sigh, "Unfortunately, they are Protestants; perhaps that is why Reverend Mother never took to Ethel as much as the rest of us did."

"I am above prejudices of that kind," Lord Lannowe gravely declared. "I prefer a pretty Protestant to a—No, no! what am I saying? It is bad to be a Protestant, but it is an extenuating circumstance to be pretty. Oh, we'll call upon them."

"Father," said Monica, suddenly summoning up courage to ask a question to which, if she had been a little older, she must have known that only one answer could possibly be returned, "do you mind my not being pretty?"

Now, Lord Lannowe had realised that the girl's physical charms fell considerably short of the high Ferrand standard, and he regretted this for her sake, if not for his own; but her pathetic appeal almost brought the tears into his eyes.

"My dear child," he exclaimed, "you are as pretty as youth and health and a strong family likeness to your sisters can make you! What ill-natured, ill-conditioned woman has been telling you that you are not?"

"Oh, nobody," answered Monica, laughing rather tremulously; "I can see for myself. I only wanted to

say that you must not be troubled if it is difficult to marry me, because I should always be very happy as a religious."

"What! shut yourself up in a convent and leave me to end my days all alone at Lannowe? I like that!"

"You would like that?" echoed Monica, interrogatively.

"No; when I say I like that, I mean that I should not like it at all. You will have to learn English, Monica. Do you know that you talk like a foreigner, and look rather like one too? I don't speak of your shockingly foreign ideas. Let me tell you my own ideas, which I flatter myself are English, even if they aren't shared by Frances and Georgina and Lettice—as, between ourselves, I dare say they aren't. I don't see that it is any woman's duty to marry, least of all when she has an aged, widowed father upon her hands. I want to keep you with me as long as I can, and if I can keep you until the end of my days, why, so much the better for me! I shall be ready, nevertheless, to give you up to any good fellow who may love you and whom you may love; only if you ever ask me to give you up to a religious community, I shall consider that a poor return to me for buying you a lot of new clothes, calling upon people of whom I have never heard in my life, and taking you to the circus. Do you understand?"

They soon understood one another very well indeed—as well, perhaps, as it is possible for an old man and a young girl to understand one another. They were, in any case, mutually pleased, which was the main point. Lord Lannowe had installed himself magnificently at the Hôtel Bristol, for although he was a poor man, he had seldom lived like one, nor were the associations of the Indian governorship which he had just relinquished such as to suggest economy. Moreover, he was at least

temporarily well-to-do, seeing that he had saved something out of his official salary, that he had let his place in Yorkshire during his absence at a handsome rental and that—his wife was dead. The late Lady Lannowe, a brilliant, energetic woman, had pushed him on in the world, had obtained appointments for him and had married her daughters splendidly, but, to set against that, she had been expensive. He was probably rather better off without her than with her; better off, it may be, in every sense, inasmuch as her ladyship had had a high, imperious temper and a sharp tongue.

Well, she had certainly not transmitted either of the above attributes to her youngest child, and Lord Lannowe, thankfully recognising this, as he sat in the dim box at the theatre that evening—a little sleepy after an excellent dinner—said to himself that there are, after all, more desirable things than beauty, even in a woman.

Monica, for her part, may have been thinking that there are more amusing things than a tragedy by Racine. Having been carefully educated, she could appreciate up to a certain point the sonorous elegance of that classic master; still, one does not, at the age of seventeen, go to a theatre for the first time in order to be forcibly reminded of the schoolroom, and the entrance of Colonel Gervase during the first *entr'acte* was a welcome diversion to her. She remembered very well having once before seen that tall, grave, fine-looking man, who was now serving as Military Attaché to the British Embassy in Paris, and she also knew more about his antecedents than her father supposed; for, indeed, children generally do hear and recollect more than their elders suppose. Monica was aware that in years gone by Colonel Gervase had been rather badly treated by her sister Frances. Whether there had been

an actual engagement or not she was not sure ; but it was notorious that Gervase had been thrown over in favour of the Duke of Leith, a man some years older than Lord Lannowe, and he had remained a bachelor ever since. That he had likewise remained the Duchess's most intimate friend was, in Monica's opinion, a circumstance highly creditable to him. Persons better acquainted with the world and with human nature were of a different opinion ; but it so happened that those persons were, for once, mistaken, and that the guileless Monica was in the right. For the Duchess of Leith, though still beautiful and pleasant-mannered, like all the Ferrands, was a stupid, selfish, heartless woman ; and if her former adorer had not acknowledged to himself that he was sick of the sight of her, that was only by reason of an obstinate, chivalrous fidelity to the past, which was a part of his nature. He greeted Monica as an old man greets a child, calling her at once by her Christian name, metaphorically patting her on the head and asking her whether she was not glad to be released from her cage.

"I was very happy at the convent, but I am very glad to be with my father," she demurely replied.

At this Lord Lannowe laughed. "You see how well the children are brought up by these good Sisters. I suppose if Monica had just been turned out from a first-class boarding-school in England, she would have answered, 'I should jolly well think I was!' All the same, I do believe she is as satisfied with her old father as he is with her, and we have made great friends already, and we shall know better than to take your advice about theatres another time, Ned. Tomorrow night we're going to the *cirque*. Will you come?"

Unfortunately, Colonel Gervase was engaged for the next night ; but he owned that he personally preferred

equestrian feats to blank verse, and he apologised for having been the means of inflicting a dull evening upon his friends.

"Only you asked me to what theatre a girl of Monica's age could be taken, you know, and there really isn't a single one just now, except the *Français* and the *Odéon*."

Perhaps it was in order to make atonement that he took some pains to amuse the girl, at whose elbow he seated himself, while Lord Lannowe dozed in the background. Or it may have been because something about her personality—the poise of her head, little tricks of voice and gesture, a way that she had of shutting up her eyes when she laughed—revived half-forgotten memories for him. Certainly she was very far from being as beautiful as Frances Ferrand had once been ; but, on the other hand, she was a good deal more attractive than the Duchess of Leith now was. It is permissible for a man who is as near forty as no matter to be attracted by a child of seventeen, and he may even endeavour to attract her without much danger either to her peace of mind or to his own.

Monica, would, in any case, have found Colonel Gervase interesting, for she had romantic ideas respecting his lifelong disappointment and constancy which a suggestion of weariness and melancholy in the set of his features helped to confirm. Also she thought him remarkably handsome, with his aquiline nose and his clear grey eyes, although he was becoming bald and although his hair had begun to turn grey at the temples. Strange indeed did it seem to her that he should have been rejected for the Duke of Leith, that grubby little old man whose peevish temper made him a daily trial to all about him. She could only assume that pressure had been brought to bear upon her sister Frances—

pressure of a kind which did not strike a girl nurtured in French traditions as extraordinary or unreasonable.

Colonel Gervase both asked and answered a considerable number of questions, for the dialogue in the box was not much interrupted by that upon the stage. She heard from him the names of various distinguished spectators; she learned that he was not greatly enamoured of his present post, which he expected to relinquish ere long; she was also informed that he thought of resigning his commission in the army, now that he had come into possession of a small landed estate in the Eastern counties, where he hoped to end his days; he added that he was fonder of sport than of society, and that he detested London. Monica, on her side, was equally communicative, if she had less to communicate. She could not tell him what her personal tastes were, for the excellent reason that she had as yet had no opportunity for forming any; but she spoke of her prospects, alluded to her affection for Ethel Dallison (at the sound of whose name he made a slight grimace) and owned that she was looking forward to her first season in London. She was to be taken under the Duchess's wing, it appeared, and she did not see why an arrangement which sounded so promising should draw a compassionate sigh from him.

"Only because you are so young," he replied, on being requested point-blank to explain. "One knows what a London season means, and one wishes that that sort of thing could be put off a little longer."

"My marriage, do you mean?" asked Monica, placidly (and he could not help thinking how like a Ferrand it was to accept woman's destiny in this matter-of-course way.) "Yes, I am not in a hurry; I should like to wait a year or two, if I might choose. But I

think most likely my sisters will say that I must not be too difficult."

"No doubt they will; but it doesn't follow that you are bound to obey your sisters," Colonel Gervase returned almost angrily. "Your life belongs to you, not to them, I take it."

"Our lives never belong to ourselves alone," Monica announced, in her prim little convent-bred style.

"Well," observed Gervase, smiling, "if yours belongs to anybody else, it must surely be to your father, in the first instance. Is he so eager to get rid of you?"

Monica glanced over her shoulder at Lord Lannowe, who was now peacefully slumbering.

"He is so good and kind!" she whispered. "We were talking this afternoon about my marrying, and he declared that he would like to keep me with him always. But I don't think he can have quite meant that. It would not be reasonable, would it?"

Gervase's brow clouded over. Were they all the same? he was wondering; did they all, from the moment that they left the nursery, begin to regard man as their legitimate quarry and themselves as defrauded if they failed to run him down?

"I suppose it wouldn't," he agreed curtly, and changed the subject.

At the close of the evening, however, he reverted to it for a moment.

"Look here, Monica," said he; "although I am not a great frequenter of smart society, circumstances have compelled me to know a good deal about most of the people whom you are likely to meet in London. Don't let your sisters make up a match for you without consulting me. That is a pretty cool request, you will say; but really, if you will think of it, it is a perfectly harmless one. You will not need to act upon my advice on

to believe in my information ; but it can't hurt you to hear me."

"Thank you," answered the girl, wonderingly ; "you are very kind. Yes, I will consult you when the time comes, if it ever does come, and if I have the chance."

"Oh, I will take care that you shall have the chance. And now, as the curtain will fall presently, perhaps I had better wake up your father."

CHAPTER III

MISS DALLISON'S VICTIMS

MR. SOL WHARTON came tearing down the Champs Élysées in his motor-car at a rate of speed which would assuredly have brought him into collision with the police, if Paris possessed any police worthy of the good old Imperial traditions in these democratic days. As it was, on turning into the Place de la Concorde he narrowly escaped coming into collision with a sauntering Englishman, who skipped nimbly aside and objurgated him in terms more forcible than polite. Mr. Wharton at once stopped his machine, got out and advancing, with his straw hat in his hand, said, in slow, drawling accents—

“Sorry to have alarmed you, sir. Let me tell you, nevertheless, that I object to being called a damned clumsy tinker.”

“Then you shouldn’t behave like one,” curtly returned the young man whom he addressed, and with whom, by reason of his stature and breadth of chest, it might have seemed imprudent to quarrel. But Sol Wharton, though educated in England, was now domiciled in Paris, and as he had assimilated the costume, together with many of the customs, of France, he probably did not contemplate anything so low as a resort to fisticuffs. He was feeling in his pocket for his card-case when the Englishman suddenly clapped him on the shoulder and burst out into a laugh, saying—

"Don't trouble yourself! You evidently don't recognise me; but I know who you are, my dear Wharton, in spite of your foreign get-up, and I decline to make myself into a target for you after having been nearly flattened out by that old steam-roller of yours."

The young American stared for a moment, and then caught the speaker by the hand.

"Gretton, of all men in the world!" he cried. "Why, this is perfectly splendid! Say—where'll you come and breakfast with me?"

"I breakfasted two hours ago, thanks," answered the other; "I can't make my British digestion accommodate itself to Continental hours, I'm sorry to say."

"Is that so? Well, then you'll have to come and dine with us in the rue de Varennes. I expect we can fix dinner at an hour late enough to suit you, unless you've altered your habits since Oxford. And what are you doing over here, Gretton?"

"Taking a short Easter holiday from the Law Courts, like other people."

"What, you're a barrister, then?"

Gretton nodded. "A budding one. We can't all be millionaires, you know."

Mr. Wharton shrugged his shoulders and frowned at his little patent-leather boots.

"I don't know as I wouldn't sooner be a barrister than a millionaire," he remarked pensively. "Seems to me there isn't much for American millionaires to do over here, and there's still less on the other side."

He was a thin, rather sallow young man, with a slight, waxed moustache and tired eyes. It might be divined that if he had not yet discovered what occupations Paris had to offer to his class, he had at least investigated the subject with some assiduity. For the rest, he was a very good-natured person, and he was

sincerely glad to have met this former University acquaintance of his.

"Say," he resumed presently, "don't you want to come to our dance tomorrow evening? Only a *petite sauterie*, but I'd like to make you acquainted with my mother and my sisters."

"Thanks awfully," answered the other, with visible hesitation. "I'm not much of a dancer, though."

"Well, you needn't dance; half of the Englishmen don't, and we're expecting quite a number of English tomorrow. Anyway, there'll be one countrywoman of yours whom you'll like to see, if you haven't seen her already—Miss Dallison."

"I haven't either seen or heard of her yet. Why shall I like to see her?"

Mr. Wharton stood on tiptoe, gathered his fingers into a bunch, kissed the tips of them fervently and then flung his open hand into the air—an expressive pantomime, adapted from the French.

"Oh, is that why?" asked Gretton, laughing.

"That is why," replied his friend, gravely. "When I've presented you, you'll know more about it. I tell you, sir, there's nothing to touch that girl in Paris or London or Vienna, and if you press me, I'll add New York and Washington."

"Oh!—the future Mrs. Sol, then?"

"Well," drawled Mr. Wharton, "that's just what I can't tell you. It would be a friendly act on your part to find out for me."

"Can't you find out for yourself?"

"I could; but, you see, it's this way: my family are dead against her; they would like to have me marry into the English or French aristocracy, and I guess she knows it. I'm willing to defy my family if she is; but I don't want to get 'No' for an answer and lose sight

of her right away. Supposing mother were to hear that she had refused me—and women always do hear these things—that would be a very good excuse for not asking her to the house again.”

“I see. Then you wish me to intimate to Miss Dallison that you are ready to propose to her, but that you won’t commit yourself until you are sure of being accepted.”

“Not if you value your life! I spend a couple of hours in the *salle d’armes* most days, and I’m a fair shot with a pistol, as you may remember. No; all I ask of you is to talk to her about me, and discover, if you can, how the land lies. You might mention that we were friends at Oxford, and, as I’m a modest man, I’ll leave it to you to put in any remarks that you may judge appropriate about my moral and intellectual qualities.”

“And what if I myself fall a victim to Miss Dallison’s fascinations?”

“I believe I’ll have to accept that risk,” answered Mr. Wharton, with a grin. “It don’t amount to much, anyway, for she has just about as many victims as she has male acquaintances, and you are only a bird of passage here.”

Cuthbert Gretton resumed his aimless stroll when, after some further parley, his American friend left him. To stroll aimlessly about the sunny streets and boulevards of Paris did not bore him, for he had really been working rather hard of late, and he had crossed the Channel for the express purpose of indulging in complete idleness. The field sports which were his customary recreations were out of season, the holiday that he had been able to grant himself was necessarily so brief a one that he had no objection to spending it alone, and he certainly did not feel much desire for the entertainment to which he had been so unexpectedly bidden. It was

the sort of engagement, he said to himself, that might be broken without discourtesy or inconvenience to anybody, and he could easily employ the evening in a rather more amusing manner.

Nevertheless, he was deposited at half-past ten on the following night beneath the *perron* of the spacious *hôtel* in the rue de Varennes which had been acquired by the Wharton family. He had decided, upon reflection, that it might be interesting to obtain a glimpse of one of those queer phases of modern society with which he was unfamiliar ; possibly, too, he felt a little curiosity to behold that fair compatriot of his who had conquered Mr. Sol Wharton's well-seasoned heart.

It was indeed a somewhat queer and incongruous scene that met his eyes as he entered the ballroom. It was an extremely brilliant and charming one, both in respect of company and of decoration—breathing unavoidably of wealth, yet, as justice to Mrs. Wharton compelled the new-comer to acknowledge, disfigured by no evidence of bad taste. Perhaps it was bad taste for wealthy Americans to be in the Faubourg Saint-Germain at all ; perhaps those old walls, which had witnessed the transit of so many stately generations, ought not to have been repainted and regilded, in precise renewal of bygone glories, by representatives of successful speculation ; perhaps persons of a fastidious temperament ought to feel that the Seine is less easy to cross than the Atlantic. But nobody, after all, can be expected to be fastidious in the opening years of the twentieth century, and if Mrs. Wharton was not that, she was at least a very pleasant and nice-mannered old lady. She was even, in appearance, an aristocratic one, with her abundant white hair and her slight figure ; she greeted the young man in a friendly fashion and introduced him to her married daughter, the Princesse de Pontbrisé, as

well as to several other ladies with high-sounding names. Evidently the passage of the Whartons across the Seine had not been opposed, and they were in every sense at home in the quarter which they had invaded.

"My son is dancing just now," Mrs. Wharton said, "but he will find partners for you as soon as he is through, Mr. Gretton. I can't offer to replace him, for I don't know the names of half of these young ladies. Most of them are his friends, not mine."

If so, they did credit to his discrimination, Gretton thought, noting that they were almost all pretty, and all, with but one visible exception, well dressed. The solitary unfortunate who, even to dull masculine vision, was thus deplorably distinguished wore a black dress which showed signs of having done duty on many previous occasions. All that could be said for it was that it served to throw up the snowy whiteness of its wearer's neck and arms; but of the wearer it might be said—at any rate, by a mere man—that it really did not matter what she wore. She was very tall, she held herself well, her movements were full of ease and grace, she had large dark eyes and the profile of a Greek goddess. Beyond all question she was the most beautiful woman in the room, and in all probability she was Miss Dallison.

This conjecture was verified, as soon as the music ceased and the dancers dispersed, by Sol, resplendent in a white satin waistcoat, knee-breeches, silk stockings and tiny shoes, adorned with paste buckles. Was it possible, the Englishman wondered, that that sort of costume was the fashion? Perhaps it was not the fashion; but Mr. Wharton's tailor had affirmed that it was going to be, and Mr. Wharton liked to get a little ahead of other people. He was very hearty in his welcome; he said he meant his friend to have a real good time, and that he must secure him a partner for

the cotillon, which was to be the chief feature of a small and early entertainment.

"But, first of all, don't you want me to present you to Miss Dallison?"

"I think I do," Gretton answered, smiling. "That is, if Miss Dallison is the girl in black."

Sol nodded. "Ah, you couldn't mistake her after what I told you. Well?"

"Well, I am bound to admit that what you told me was no exaggeration. She seems to be a good deal surrounded, though; she won't care to be bothered with a humble nobody like me, I'm afraid."

"My dear sir, her character is just as lovely as her face; I never knew her put on airs with anybody, as most of your English women do when they get a little extra attention. Come right along with me and judge for yourself."

Presently Mr. Gretton was making his best bow to Miss Dallison, who turned away from the trim-bearded French dandies by whom she was being besieged to smile very graciously upon the stranger. She had a bewitching smile and a singularly soft, musical voice.

"Mr. Wharton has been telling me," said she, "that he knew you at Oxford. I once spent a day at Oxford, and I have been longing to go back there ever since. You can't imagine how one longs for English places and English faces when one is a permanent exile."

She spoke with apparent sincerity, and her eyes scrutinised with apparent pleasure the typically English face which towered some four or five inches above her own. Cuthbert Gretton, indeed, if not strictly handsome, was an extremely nice-looking young man, with close-cut brown hair, a clear, healthy skin, a pair of honest grey eyes and white, regular teeth. He was obviously a gentleman; he had been, and still was, an athlete;

his whole aspect, contrasting markedly, as it did, with that of the other men who composed the company, was suggestive of a whiff of fresh air in a heavily scented atmosphere. He asked, in accents involuntarily compassionate—

"Are you a permanent exile?"

"Oh yes," she answered; "we live abroad because we can't afford to live at home." Then, after a short pause, she laughed and said, "You are looking at my gloves. You are quite right; I wear black gloves because I can't afford to wear white ones."

"Is she," mused the young man, "going to marry Sol Wharton because she can't afford not to marry him? It seems an awful pity!"

But it was not, he remembered, in order to make such reflections as this that he had been honoured with an introduction to Miss Dallison, and he was neglecting the immediate, ostensible object of an introduction effected under the circumstances.

"I suppose," said he diffidently, "it isn't much use to ask if you have a dance left for me?"

"The next one, if you like," was her unexpected reply. "I have adopted the plan of never engaging myself in advance. That system, you see, leaves the door open to agreeable surprises."

"It is I who am agreeably surprised," Cuthbert declared.

"Perhaps that was what I meant," she demurely returned, thereby causing her partner's cheeks to become suffused by an ingenuous blush.

He was not, truth to tell, a very finished or efficient partner, and although she herself danced so superbly that nobody could go wrong with her, he was fain, after a couple of turns, to offer her the apology which seemed to be her due.

"I'm an awful duffer at this sort of thing," he owned.

She did not contradict him ; but, "All nice men are," she returned. "At least, all nice Englishmen are, and no men are half as nice as Englishmen. Suppose we sit out the rest of the dance and talk?"

She could talk as well as she danced, he found, and she had the additional merit—to which he was less consciously, if not less pleasantly, alive—of listening as well as she talked. She appeared to be, and possibly was, much interested in hearing the short and simple annals of his life ; her interest was increased, or she said it was, by the circumstance of his being an orphan, and still more so when he mentioned that his home, so far as he could be said to have a home, was with his uncle in Yorkshire.

"Yorkshire is a very large county, of course," she remarked ; "but I wonder whether by any chance you know the Ferrands, who are Yorkshire people."

"Oh dear, yes," he answered ; "Lannowe is only a few miles from my uncle's place. I can't say that I am particularly well acquainted with them myself. I used sometimes to meet Lord Lannowe out hunting when I was a boy, and a very good old fellow he was. I didn't care quite so much about her ladyship, who was a rather high and mighty person and who took very little notice of the squirearchy. But she is dead now, and the place has been let for some years, and all the daughters are married."

"Not all," corrected Miss Dallison ; "my little friend Monica remains, and is upon the point of being installed as the lady of the house in her father's establishment, I believe. It isn't easy to imagine her in such a position, poor child ; but she will have to adapt herself to it somehow."

"Oh, the youngest girl? Yes, I remember now

hearing that she was being educated in a convent abroad. So she is a friend of yours, is she?"

"A convent friend. The finishing touches were put to my own education in the same establishment."

"Are you a Roman Catholic, then?"

"No; but heretics are not refused as pupils there, and I fancy that they have always a kind of hope of making conversions in that way."

"Which was disappointed in your case?"

"No very vigorous efforts were made in my case; Rome doesn't clamour for pauper recruits. I think Monica doesn't altogether despair of me, though. Perhaps it is partly on that account that she is so anxious for me to go and stay at Lannowe."

"Oh!—and are you going?"

Miss Dallison shook her head. "I doubt it. Lord Lannowe is not very likely to invite me; and even if he did, there would be the expense of the journey and of the clothes which would have to be bought. No; I am afraid there isn't much chance of my going."

She insisted a little more than was necessary upon her poverty, Cuthbert thought. It is not, after all, a crime to be poor, though it is doubtless a misfortune. Not being able at the moment to specify any compensating feature in that misfortune, he only said—

"I do hope you'll manage it."

"Why?" she inquired, with an amused look.

He was prevented from making the very frank reply which was upon the tip of his tongue by the advent of his host, who said—

"I've been trying to find you a partner for the cotillon, Gretton; but it seems that they are all committed already, except Mademoiselle de Villefranche. I haven't made the suggestion to her yet, though she is a charming young lady, and one of the best dancers

here, because I didn't know but you might object to having to talk French to her."

"I should indeed," Cuthbert answered. "My French, I am sorry to say, is of a most elementary order."

"Added to which," interposed Miss Dallison, "Mr. Gretton has secured a partner without your help." She pointed smilingly to herself, and went on, "Mademoiselle de Villefranche is clearly marked out for you, who speak the purest Parisian French. Besides, she takes precedence of us all in point of rank, so it wouldn't look well for you to dance with anybody else."

"I am an American citizen," protested the discomfited Sol, "and we're living under a Republican form of government here. I'm not supposed to know that there is any difference of rank amongst my mother's guests. I thought you had promised me——"

"I thought," she interrupted, "you knew that I never promise to dance with anybody until the last moment. As for ignoring differences of rank, you can't do that after establishing yourself in the rue de Varennes, dressing your servants in old-fashioned liveries and marrying your sister to the Prince de Pontbrisé. Your mother would never have forgiven you if you had led the cotillon with such a mere nobody as I am, and what is worse is that she would never have forgiven me either. You ought to thank me, instead of scowling at me."

Poor Sol had not scowled, he had only looked deeply reproachful. But his countenance lightened up a little at Miss Dallison's last words, which were in truth not ill chosen as a means towards restoring him to good humour. Very likely he thought her a clever, far-seeing girl, and very likely she deserved his unspoken encomium. He resigned himself to her will with a shrug of his shoulders, and, as soon as he was out of hearing, she said—

"I really should have given offence if I had thrust myself forward by dancing with him, and I didn't at all want to dance with him ; so I had the inspiration of thrusting myself upon you instead. I hope you don't mind ?"

"Mind !" ejaculated Cuthbert, with condensed eloquence. "Only," he added with a sigh, "you have had convincing evidence of what a wretched partner I am."

"Oh, you don't dance badly," she returned, "and it would be all the same if you did ; we shall have more conversation than waltzing in the cotillon. Go on telling me about Yorkshire, and about your uncle Mr. Scarth and your people there. I love to hear about English country life, because it is an open question whether I shall ever see it with my own eyes."

He was very anxious that she should enjoy that privilege, very anxious that she should do so under such favourable conditions as would be afforded by a visit to Lannowe and very willing to tempt her by the exercise of any descriptive powers that he had at command. He did his best during the cotillon, which was a long, elaborate and graceful performance, skilfully conducted by Sol and glorified by costly gifts and decorations. He was by nature a modest youth, yet he could not but be aware—he was, in fact, virtually told—that he had produced an agreeable impression upon Miss Dallison. The impression which she produced upon him was that which a remarkably beautiful girl who goes out of her way to be kind and civil to one of the opposite sex must of necessity produce upon the favoured individual. He had not exactly fallen in love with her, but he dimly realised (and perhaps she realised without any dimness) that she could make him fall in love with her as easily as possible. When all was over, and she was preparing to depart under the wing of the French lady who had

chaperoned her, she said, after a moment of apparent hesitation—

“If you are going to be a little longer in Paris, and if you have nothing particular to do about five o'clock tomorrow afternoon, and if you are capable of climbing up to the third story of a house in an unfashionable street——”

“Oh, but of course I shall be delighted!” he cried.

She smiled. “Then I may mention, without committing you to anything, that to-morrow is my mother's reception day. Rue de Moscou, 95, *au troisième*. You will have to take a cab. Mr. Wharton would show you the way; but I would rather you didn't bring Mr. Wharton with you, please. Good night.”

Soon afterwards Cuthbert, having taken leave of his hostess, was making for the exit when he was intercepted by Sol, who removed a cigarette from his lips to remark—

“Well, you've had even more opportunity for carrying out my modest request than I meant to give you. Any result?”

“My dear fellow,” answered the young Englishman, with genuine contrition, “I'm awfully sorry; but Miss Dallison began talking about England and Yorkshire and one thing and another, and—and the fact is that I clean forgot your request.”

CHAPTER IV

THE ART OF EQUITATION

MRS. DALLISON'S small, dingy *salon* had been made as tidy as the *femme de ménage* could be persuaded to make it for the reception of the few visitors who frequented the rue de Moscou once a week. Mrs. Dallison matched her *salon* in that she also was small and dingy. She was a sallow, fretful woman, older in aspect than in years, who had every excuse for being fretful and looking old in the shape of exiguous means and a husband who was much more often drunk than sober. It is true that, as some sort of compensation, she had an extremely beautiful daughter; but her daughter's behaviour was not always of a nature to give her comfort. What, for instance, was the sense of having asked a young man to call who, by Ethel's own admission, was neither rich nor highly connected?

"I can't think why you do these things!" she complained. "It is very marked to make advances like that to a total stranger, and—and I don't think Mr. Wharton would like it, if he knew."

"Now that you mention it," answered Ethel, in the soft, low-pitched voice which was one of her many charms, "I dare say he wouldn't. But let us not take too gloomy a view of the situation; perhaps he won't know."

"Wharton going to look us up this afternoon?"

inquired Major Dallison, in nervously cheerful accents. "Pleasant fellow, Wharton ; always glad to see him."

He spoke with assumed cheerfulness because he was quite sober and because, as was always the case with him on such rare occasions, he was quite miserable. There were times, as his unfortunate wife well knew, when he could be savage and brutal ; but he was timid when not under the influence of alcohol, and he had become increasingly afraid of his daughter, who did not disguise her contempt for him. In answer to his question, she said—

"Oh dear, no ! He goes a long way ; it is only fair to him to admit that he does go a very long way ; but—not quite so far as to the rue de Moscou. It is already a good deal that he deigns to own acquaintance with anybody who lives there."

Mrs. Dallison drew in her breath impatiently, while the Major, with shaking fingers, caressed his waxed moustache. Those trembling hands of his, those watery eyes, those dull-red, pendulous cheeks advertised him for what he was and seemed to invite the resolutely closed doors which he had ceased to resent. Major and Mrs. Dallison had been pronounced impossible, although he was known to be a gentleman by birth ; and if Miss Dallison was to be met in some exclusive Parisian circles, that was only because her parents were not too proud to let her accept hospitality which was not extended to themselves. They may have felt that pride, in their case, would have been somewhat anomalous ; what they certainly did feel was that they could not afford such a luxury. With some difficulty, and as a bold speculation, they had managed, at Ethel's suggestion, to afford the expense of sending her to an aristocratic convent to be educated, and in that way she had made some very desirable acquaintances, although the

brilliant marriage to which they looked forward had not thus far come off. Sol Wharton, in virtue of his millions of dollars, must be regarded as brilliant ; but the disquieting thing was that they could not be at all sure of her accepting Sol Wharton. She was very apt to do just exactly what she liked, and her parents would have been still more disquieted had she told them what a very genuine liking she had taken to Cuthbert Gretton.

He was amongst the earlier arrivals of a gathering which was small, if scarcely select. Not many people cared to bear Mrs. Dallison's reception day in mind, while those who did were either unmistakably shady or patronisingly compassionate ; so that young Gretton, with his fresh, simple manner, his well-fitting clothes and his general air of belonging to a decent sort of class, could not but impress these *déclassés* agreeably. However, he took little more notice of them than civility required ; he had eyes only for their daughter, whose claims upon the eyes of any and every young man were, to be sure, undeniable. Her beauty struck him as enhanced by the broad light of day ; the smiles with which he was from time to time favoured were, he thought, not a bit those of a flirt, but only of a fellow-creature who had conceived friendly sentiments for him, and the scraps of conversation that he had with her when she was not handing round tea and cakes confirmed that view. Well, he was glad, of course, to be thus honoured. Equally of course, he could not help perceiving what kind of people the Dallisons were, and this made him a little sorry that Sol Wharton's affections should have fixed themselves where they had done. Not, indeed, on Sol's account (for it would be infinitely better luck than Sol, or perhaps anybody else, deserved to win that goddess in human form), but because it seemed barely possible for a suitor so opulent to be refused. He

ventured upon some tentative allusion to the Wharton family, to which Miss Dallison made frank and unembarrassed response.

"Oh, they are very nice and kind. A little too Frenchified for my taste. In Madame de Pontbrisé it doesn't jar. She was brought up here, she has married a Frenchman and she has assimilated the whole part quite successfully; but the son, I sometimes think, is a little ridiculous. Why can't he be satisfied with being an American? That, after all, is the next best thing to being an Englishman."

"Thank you," said Gretton, laughing.

She laughed also. "Well, I told you last night how devoted I am to my own nation. I ask for nothing better than to spend the rest of my days in England; but nothing, alas! is less likely to happen to me."

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

She was prevented from replying by a shrill summons from her mother, who wanted the teapot replenished, and before she could return to the corner of the room where the young man was seated, two unexpected visitors were announced. Lord Lannowe, a little out of breath after his long climb, and perhaps a trifle taken aback at finding himself in an assemblage for which he had not been prepared, bowed and shook hands with his accustomed amiability, but was evidently embarrassed by the obsequious effusiveness of Mrs. Dallison's greeting. As for Monica, she flung herself headlong into Ethel's arms; and if the two girls, thus locked in a tender embrace, did not make a charming picture, there were, at all events, two men present who thought they did.

"Handsomest woman I've seen in the last fifty years, by Jove!—not excepting my own daughters," said the elder of these to himself. "Looks like a lady, too; and

she isn't to blame, hang it all ! if her father and mother look like what I suppose they are. Oh, I shall ask her to come and stay at Lannowe. Ned Gervase be bothered ! —it's nonsense to call her 'an undesirable acquaintance.' The parents can't expect to be asked, and they wouldn't be if they did. I think I see Georgie's face on being introduced to them !”

It may be conjectured that Miss Dallison would have been very much pleased had she been aware of the above silent soliloquy. She was, at any rate, very much pleased to see her little friend Monica Ferrand, with whom she sat apart, hand in hand, until Mr. Gretton took the liberty of joining them. He took the further liberty of reminding Miss Ferrand that they had met before, and, although she was fain to confess that her personal recollection of him was dim, she knew quite well who he was. Lord Lannowe, on the other hand, recognised Cuthbert from the opposite side of the room and came bustling up with all the more cordiality because he was so glad to escape from Mrs. Dallison and her friends.

“My dear fellow,” he exclaimed, “what a pleasure to come across you after all these years ! Knew you at once, though you've added I don't know how many inches to your stature since we met last. Well, I'm on my way back to the old county now, and I hope I'm not too old yet for an occasional day with the hounds. Your uncle Robert as keen as ever, I suppose ? Terribly sudden thing the death of your other uncle seems to have been. Poor Tom ! he used to be the picture of health and strength ; but he had a weak heart, I understand.”

“Yes, I believe so,” answered Cuthbert. “Mr. Scarth wasn't my uncle, though ; I am only related to Uncle Robert through his having married my aunt.”

“Of course !—of course ! I was forgetting. Yes, if

you had been poor old Tom's nephew, he would have made you his heir, I presume, instead of leaving everything to a Catholic—the very last thing that I should have expected such a black Protestant as he used to be to do! Do you know anything about this young fellow—Nigel, I think his name is—who comes into the property?”

“Yes, I knew a good deal about him when we were at Oxford together,” Cuthbert replied; “we were great friends in those days. Afterwards I gradually lost sight of him. I was reading law hard in London while he was going the pace in a style which, I believe, pretty nearly ruined him, and then all of a sudden, as I dare say you are aware, he astonished everybody by disappearing into a monastery. It is very doubtful, I should think, whether he will care to accept Rixmouth, which can only be his for life, anyhow.”

“Oh, he has accepted,” said Lord Lannowe. “I had a letter this morning from Monsignor Nolan, who tells me that he is expected to take possession any day. I am afraid the poor young man won't find his position an easy one, and it would hardly be in human nature for your uncle Robert to give him a very warm welcome. Well, we must do what we can to be neighbourly.”

Lord Lannowe's genial temperament always inclined him to do what he could for his neighbours, and, like the Good Samaritan, he placed a liberal interpretation upon that term. He now entered into familiar conversation with Miss Dallison, who met his advances in a manner entirely satisfactory to him, and if he thought that he was doing something for her by inviting her to visit Yorkshire, it is probable that she thought so too.

“When will you come?” he asked. “The sooner the better, you know. That is, unless you prefer to wait

till August, when Monica will have got through her presentation and her first season and all the rest of it, and when, I dare say, we shall have a few people with us for the grouse shooting. Our young friend here," he added, tapping Cuthbert on the shoulder, "is an uncommonly nice shot, if he hasn't lost his skill. You will be at Knaresby for the twelfth, eh, Gretton? Now, Monica, my child, I don't want to hurry you, but I promised to be at the Embassy by six o'clock."

Monica, who had made no such promise, did not think that her absence was likely to be noticed or resented by his Britannic Majesty's representative. She pleaded to be allowed to stay a little longer with Ethel; and her father, after hesitating for a moment, made the requested concession.

"The carriage shall wait for you, then," he said; "I'll pick up a *fiacre* for myself. You and Monica had better arrange matters together about the date of your visit to us, Miss Dallison; only please remember that you are pledged to come."

His daughter, he thought, could hardly take any harm from remaining awhile in the company of her school friend; but he was not personally anxious to linger in that of Major and Mrs. Dallison, whose aspect and manners certainly appeared to bear out the rather unflattering report that he had received of them from Colonel Gervase.

As soon as he had departed, the two girls became absorbed in one of those confidential colloquies which are apt to be somewhat irritating to masculine lookers-on. Such ostensibly engrossing intercourse has the air of lacking sincerity, and possibly it does; but, at least, no man is compelled to sit still and watch it after an averted head has given him a hint to be off. Cuthbert, looking just a trifle cross, rose to take his leave, and

was not pressed to stay. At the last moment, however, Miss Dallison said—

“You are not leaving Paris immediately, are you?”

“Not for another day or two,” he answered.

“Oh!—I was wondering whether Mr. Wharton had asked you to ride in the Bois with us tomorrow morning.”

The young man shook his head. “No; and if he did, I haven’t got a horse.”

“It is not absolutely impossible to hire one,” Miss Dallison remarked, smiling; “still, I dare say that sort of riding wouldn’t amuse you much. The Wharton girls would certainly amuse you, for they amuse everybody.”

“If I were to join your party, it wouldn’t be for the sake of the Wharton girls, however entertaining they may be,” Cuthbert declared.

“Thank you very much; but I am afraid I shall be monopolised by Mr. Wharton, who is kindly teaching me to ride.”

She accompanied this information with a faint sigh which, whether intentionally or not, had rather the effect of an appeal. To this Cuthbert, needless to say, could not turn a deaf ear. Immediately on returning to his hotel, he despatched an explanatory note to his American friend and made inquiries respecting livery stables. Being himself an experienced horseman, he knew how disastrous it is to beginners to be taught in the wrong way, and he felt bound, in common humanity, to rescue poor Miss Dallison, if possible, from an incapable instructor. What on earth did Sol Wharton know about the equestrian art?

Sol Wharton, to tell the truth, did not know much, although he had had lessons from various foreign riding-masters and had acquired an elegant, if not very

workmanlike, seat. He was likewise the owner of half a dozen horses, amongst them being a well-bred Syrian Arab, with a long tail and showy action. Astride upon this curvetting animal, the tips of his little shiny boots just resting on stirrups a great deal too long, he passed with most Parisian spectators for a finished cavalier, and, as a matter of fact, he had never yet been publicly unseated.

"Where did you get that fiddle-headed brute from?" he asked on the morrow, surveying his friend's mount with pitying disapproval (for in justice to Sol it must be said that he was neither jealous nor suspicious, and he had warmly welcomed the intruder). "You might have had one of mine if you had only said so."

"Oh, I shall be all right, thanks," answered Cuthbert.

He did not doubt that he would be all right so far as his hireling's power to carry him along the alleys of the Bois went; but whether he would prove to be all right in his capacity of a self-invited member of the cavalcade seemed less certain. Miss Cora and Miss Sallie Wharton, two pretty and vivacious young ladies, were provided with a caracoling Frenchman apiece, and seemed to be contented with their escort, while Ethel Dallison, to whom had been assigned a powerful and fresh bay mare, the property of her instructor, had only a nod to bestow upon the Englishman. She rode out of the sanded courtyard of the *hôtel* in the rue de Varennes in advance of the other two couples, with Sol at her elbow, and Cuthbert did not see what excuse there was for pushing forward and thrusting his company upon her. Nor did he care to interrupt the respective flirtations of Miss Cora and Miss Sallie; so he brought up the rear in solitude and wished, while jogging through the streets and up the long incline of the Champs Élysées, that he had refrained from adding

himself to a party which was so evidently complete without him.

But one should never repent of an action until all its consequences have become manifest, and parties which look complete are not always what they appear to be. Mr. Sol Wharton's riding party, for instance, was abruptly deprived of symmetry when the Bois de Boulogne was reached by the swift elimination from it of Miss Dallison, whose mare, on feeling the soft ground beneath her, bolted off at full speed, followed by the vain shouts of her owner. Vain also were the shouts addressed from the same quarter to Cuthbert Gretton, who started in pursuit without an instant's loss of time. Sol, no doubt, was quite right, and it is worse than useless, as a general rule, to gallop at the heels of a runaway ; still, to every rule there must be exceptions, and this perhaps might be considered one of them. For indeed nothing can be more dangerous than to be run away with in an alley bordered by thick woods, intersected at frequent intervals by carriage-roads and ending in goodness only knows what impossible fence or barrier.

Cuthbert therefore gave chase as well as a rather heavy man on a very groggy steed could hope to do. Miss Dallison, of course, had the pace of him ; but he managed to keep her in sight, and he was glad to notice that she not only retained her presence of mind, but sat very close to her saddle. An abrupt turn to the left, which caused him to draw in his breath apprehensively, did not appear to disturb her, though it lost him a good many yards ; further turns followed, with similar results, and then, just as he was beginning to realise that he had no chance whatever of overtaking her, she astonished him by suddenly and without the least difficulty pulling up. He was a little out of breath and his horse was blowing like a grampus when he drew near to her.

"Allow me to congratulate you, Miss Dallison," said he. "It strikes me that you are not in much need of riding lessons either from Wharton or from anybody else."

She burst out laughing. "Mr. Wharton has given me such a number of lessons!" she pleaded. "Don't you think it was my turn to give him just one? Especially as there is so little probability of his understanding it or profiting by it. Anyhow, we have fairly distanced them, I hope, and now we can talk in peace and quietness."

The implied compliment was of a nature not to be ignored, nor could Cuthbert help being elated by it. If, in addition to being elated, he was vaguely disquieted, this was on account of his personal character, which may have been either more simple or more shrewd than that of other young men. Had he analysed his feelings (but there was no time for that), he might have discovered that it was indispensable for him to idealise a girl whom he loved, or was going to love, and that he had difficulty in idealising a girl who played tricks.

However, it did not take him long to idealise Miss Dallison, notwithstanding an early impression which subsequent conversation with her could not but efface. Subsequent conversation proved most interesting and was conducted on her side so ingenuously, so naturally, so charmingly that only an abnormally distrustful and cynical young man could have suspected her of a deliberate design to ensnare him. Moreover, if she had belonged to the class of designing ensnarers, she would scarcely have fled headlong from a millionaire in order to win the heart of an obscure barrister. So Cuthbert's heart was won by what she related to him, as well as by the lovely face and soft voice of the narrator. She contrived to tell him all about herself, and almost all about her

father and mother, without any infringement of the laws of good taste. He understood much of what she left unsaid, and indeed he had, on the previous afternoon, seen enough with his own eyes to show him what sort of an existence hers must necessarily be. No wonder he was seized with a strong desire to rescue her from it. He could not, to be sure, ask her to marry him there and then—he could not, as a matter of detail, afford to ask anybody to marry him—but he did convey certain discreet intimations, and almost he was inclined to believe that some reached him in return. Be that as it may, he had a protracted and delightful colloquy in those shady byways, which, either by luck or by Miss Dallison's good guidance and knowledge of localities, Sol Wharton and his friends failed to invade. At length it became necessary to return to the rue de Varennes, and then Cuthbert dolefully announced that his brief holiday must terminate on the morrow.

"I wonder when I shall see you again!" he added.

"Oh, but in August, of course, when I go to Lannowe," she made smiling reply. "You will be in Yorkshire then, won't you?"

"I shall certainly make a point of being there. Did you—did you guess that I should be there in August when you arranged the date of your visit?"

He thought this rather an audacious question; but she did not seem to take offence at it.

"Well, to be quite truthful," she replied, "I thought I heard Lord Lannowe say that you would; still, I am rather good at guessing." After a pause, she added demurely, and with a look of suppressed amusement in her eyes, "Strange as it may appear to you, I guessed that you would ride after me and that Mr. Wharton wouldn't when—the mare bolted with me."

"The mare never bolted at all!" said Cuthbert, bluntly.

"Ah," she returned, laughing, "now you are getting into the regions of pure conjecture, and I doubt whether you are as much at home there as I am. We will say goodbye now, please, or you will be imparting your conjectures to the Wharton family, which would never do!"

CHAPTER V

KIN AND KIND

"WELL," said Mrs. Scarth, placidly, "if your father is too busy to call upon him—and I must say that I never knew anybody who had such a gift as Robert has for being busy at a time of year when there isn't anything to do—I shall drive over and call this afternoon myself. Will you come?"

Her daughter, whom she addressed and who was sitting near her at the breakfast table, which the male members of the family had deserted, looked doubtful.

"Do you think he would like that?" she asked.

"I don't see why he should mind, and even if he did, he couldn't eat us," answered Mrs. Scarth. "After all, we are his nearest relations. Besides which, one doesn't want him to think that we are sore about his having come into the estate."

"Aren't we a little bit sore?" Bessie Scarth suggested.

"I am not. I am very comfortable where I am, and I should have hated moving to Rixmouth, which will want a great deal doing to it before it can be made anything like a comfortable house. Besides, we always know perfectly well that, whoever might succeed your uncle, we shouldn't. We have an apparent grievance, of course, but really I sometimes think poor Tom must have bequeathed that to your father because he was

aware that no legacy could give Robert half as much satisfaction. What particularly delights Robert is Tom's inconsistency in making a Roman Catholic his heir, when we were never forgiven for submitting to lighted candles on the altar of the parish church. As for me, I see no harm in lights, nor very much in Roman Catholics either. I'm all for living and let live."

Mrs. Scarth, a stoutish, elderly lady, who had contrived to live harmoniously for thirty years with the most difficult of husbands, and who had brought up a rather large family, was entitled to lay claim to that liberal attitude of mind. As the mother of half a dozen sons, she had naturally had her share of troubles and worries; but these had left no mark upon her broad, good-humoured countenance, nor had anybody ever found it possible to quarrel with her. Even the late owner of Rixmouth Castle, who had done his best, had been forced to give her up as a bad job, and had remained upon good terms with her throughout those oft-recurring periods when his brothers and he had mutually ignored one another. By her sons she was greatly beloved and unreservedly trusted, for they knew that she might always be counted upon to make allowances for their peccadilloes and also to do what in her lay towards obtaining occasional additions to the pecuniary allowances assigned to them by their stern father. As for her only daughter and youngest child, it must be confessed that the girl was a little spoilt, in the sense of having been much indulged. If Miss Bessie was not spoilt in any other sense, that was perhaps because she had an independent character, was given to field sports and was not particularly pretty. She had a neat little figure, bright blue eyes and a quantity of fair hair, which had a natural wave in it; but in the opinion of most people, including her own, these trifling advantages left

her so far from being a beauty that she was quite as likely as not to die an old maid. Old Humphry Trenchard, who, for some reason or other, was not as fond of her as her father's most intimate friend might have been expected to be, thought otherwise.

"Your daughter," he once told Robert Scarth, "has what the French call the beauty of the devil. It sounds an unflattering description, but it is really the reverse, for it means that she has what nine men out of ten can't resist. She may give you trouble in some ways, but you need have no fear of her lacking suitors. I venture to predict that she will get just as many offers of marriage as it may please her to invite or permit."

It is true that Humphry Trenchard was a blind man, which may seem to detract somewhat from the value of his statement ; still, it was admitted on all hands that he seldom made a mistake, and Robert Scarth, whose rule it was to differ from everybody, never contradicted this staunch ally of his.

It was, in any case, with no view to making a conquest of her cousin Nigel that the young lady decided to accompany Mrs. Scarth to Rixmouth Castle that fine afternoon. She was a little curious to see the ex-monk who had been so oddly and abruptly converted into a country gentleman ; but she did not expect to like him—the chances being so very much against his proving a sportsman—and it seemed to her highly probable that he would regard the visit of two ladies, nearly related to him though they were, in the light of an intrusion.

"I hope," said she, while she was being driven by her mother's side across the undulating, sparsely timbered expanse of park by which Rixmouth Castle is surrounded, "that you are prepared to be snubbed."

"Oh yes," answered Mrs. Scarth composedly, "I dare say he will snub us ; he would hardly be a Scarth

if he didn't, would he? All the same, somebody must break the ice somehow, at some time, and as I never was afraid of poor Tom, I don't see why I should be afraid of Nigel."

The huge grey edifice of which he had become the conditional master wore an aspect forbidding enough to daunt a less obstinately good-humoured caller. Rixmouth Castle was not an old building, having been reconstructed, after a disastrous fire, in the early years of the nineteenth century; but, standing as it did on an eminence exposed to all the winds of heaven, it had already assumed a weatherworn appearance, and it had the grim, inhospitable look which belongs to all dwellings of which only a corner can be inhabited. The corner wherein its new tenant had recently established himself happened to include his late uncle's library, and this—although his late uncle had been no lover of books—was a large and valuable one. He was investigating it, and was perched upon the top step of a ladder, with a duster in one hand and a heavy tome in the other, when the two ladies were announced; so that, even if he had wished to be formidable, the circumstances would have rendered such an attitude a little difficult for him. But it was evident that he had no wish of the kind. He descended rapidly, apologising, with a smile, for his dusty condition, begging his visitors to be seated and looking rather shy, rather ill at ease, as well as a good deal surprised.

"We have come," Mrs. Scarth explained, making herself comfortable in an armchair, "because my husband couldn't. He has a lot of jobs on hand just now—so he says. The proper thing, perhaps, would have been to leave his card at the door and drive away; but the truth is that I wanted to shake hands with you and welcome you to Yorkshire. When all's said and done,

blood is thicker than water. Now, don't tell me that it has taken us rather a long time to make that discovery, because I shan't have a word to say in reply if you do!"

He was not so uncivil. He murmured something about family dissensions, of which he had never known the rights or the wrongs, and glanced deprecatingly from his aunt to his cousin and back again, as though mutely imploring them not to visit the sins of his father upon him. Presently he came out with an articulate appeal.

"I am afraid it can't be very pleasant to you to see me here, and I don't myself feel that I have any right to be here; but, as you know, I am not here by my own choice."

"I thought," said Bessie, breaking silence for the first time, "that you were left free to choose."

His great brown eyes were turned upon her instantly. "Yes, but I should never have chosen to be given the choice. That was forced upon me, and I had to do what, upon the whole, seemed to be my duty."

"Of course it was your duty, my dear boy," Mrs. Scarth briskly declared. "How can it be any young fellow's duty to bury himself alive in a monastery when there is plenty of work in the world ready to his hand? And pray don't imagine that we are such dogs in the manger as to grudge you an inheritance which wouldn't have been ours if you had refused it. We are delighted, on the contrary, that there should still be a Scarth at Rixmouth, and if only you can make up your mind to return to the Church of England—— But I suppose you won't do that?"

Nigel started. "Make up my mind to apostatise!" he ejaculated, in unfeigned horror; "you cannot be speaking seriously."

"All I meant to say was that it would make things

much more smooth and comfortable for you if you could," answered Mrs. Scarth, not in the least disconcerted. "Your position, as it stands, looks rather perplexing, doesn't it?"

Nigel, with a deep sigh, agreed that it did. "I must make the best I can of it, that's all," he remarked.

"Do you hunt?" asked Bessie, in her abrupt way.

He shook his head smilingly. "I have had so few opportunities. Every now and then, while I was at Oxford, I managed a day with the hounds on a hired horse; but I am afraid you would hardly dignify that sort of thing by the name of hunting."

"Well, you will have horses of your own now. Do you shoot?"

Once more he had to plead absence of opportunity and experience. He was, however, fond of shooting, and hoped that, when the season came, he might not too conspicuously disgrace himself.

"Oh, you'll be all right," Bessie consolingly assured him—for, indeed, she had taken a fancy to his rather pathetic face and his stag-like eyes and his modest demeanour—"I can see that you are going to be all right. Really, when you come to think of it, not much more is required of you than that you should keep up the shooting and take care to have a few foxes in your coverts. You won't allow difference of religion to make you unjust to your tenants or anything of that sort, I'm sure."

"How can you be sure?" the young man made bold to inquire.

She laughed and replied that one could generally tell pretty well by looking at people. "Moreover," she added, "you belong to the family, and although it must be admitted that we are all of us a little cranky, we are at least just."

That was in truth what her father and her late uncle, and indeed every Scarth that ever lived, would have said. Their neighbours would scarcely have pronounced justice to be the distinguishing characteristic of the race ; yet it may be that the love of it was, after some queer, distorted fashion, in them. At all events, both this young lady and her mother seemed disposed to be not only just but generous to their kinsman, and his shyness soon wore off under the influence of their kindly familiarity.

"Wasn't Cuthbert Gretton rather a friend of yours at Oxford?" Mrs. Scarth asked, after a time. "Cuthbert, as he must have told you, is almost the same as a son of our own—and a dear, good fellow he has always been too."

"One of the very best fellows in the world," Nigel assented. "Yes, we used to be great friends in those days, he and I. Afterwards"—he hesitated for a moment—"afterwards we didn't see quite so much of one another."

"There isn't very much to be seen of anybody except monks in a monastery, I presume," observed Bessie. "Wasn't Cuthbert horrified when he heard that you had determined to enter one?"

"I—I don't know," Nigel confessed, with an uneasy look ; "we had ceased to meet before that time."

His face clouded over, as it always did when he thought of that brief period of debauchery which his nature and his subsequent training had caused him to magnify into something more heinous than it really was. Had these good people heard about it? Did they know that Cuthbert had been compelled to drop him because a respectable young barrister could hardly afford to be seen in his company? So simple and so conscientious was he, despite what he imagined to be his exhaustive

acquaintance with a wicked world, that he was seriously debating with himself whether they ought not to be told when the door opened, and the entrance of an elderly, portly personage in clerical attire preserved him from making needless admissions.

This was Monsignor Nolan, domestic chaplain to Lord Lannowe, and a popular personage in the neighbourhood, to which he had returned in the above capacity after an absence of some years. He had already made acquaintance with Nigel, to whom he had been helpful in sundry small ways and who welcomed him with a certain sense of relief, saying—

"I am not sure whether you know my aunt and my cousin."

"It would be a queer day when I needed an introduction to Mrs. Scarth," answered Monsignor Nolan, holding out a plump hand to that lady, who got up and grasped it. "As for Miss Scarth, I am afraid she can't remember me as well as I remember her. There's no difference worth mentioning between fifty-five and fifty-nine; but it takes four of the longest years in life to grow from fifteen to nineteen."

"I was twenty last birthday," said Bessie, "and I have a very good memory. I remember who didn't often miss a meet of the hounds and who sometimes couldn't pull his cob up until he had seen the end of a run. Do you still take snuff?"

"Indeed I do, my dear young lady," answered the priest, seating himself and suiting the action to the word; "would you have me perfect—like yourself?"

He beamed at her through his gold-rimmed spectacles and rubbed his hands contentedly.

"Well, here we all are again!" he went on. "That is, here we shall all be in a day or two, when his lordship comes home for good and all, I hope. There's one

absence, to be sure, rest his soul! Confess now, Mrs. Scarth; isn't it pain and grief to you to see a Papist in your brother-in-law's house?"

"Nothing of the sort!" Mrs. Scarth declared; "I have just been telling Nigel how much rather we would see him here than some stranger of our own faith. I should be glad, for his own sake, if he could manage to revert to the religion of his fathers; but I dare say you will take good care that he doesn't."

Monsignor Nolan took another pinch of snuff, without smiling. He was an easy-going person, but a cautious one, and there were subjects upon which he did not consider it prudent to jest. He adopted the safer course of remarking how glad he was to think that under the new *régime* there was likely to be an end of those family bickerings which, during the late Mr. Thomas Scarth's lifetime, had rendered it difficult for lovers of peace to maintain a friendly attitude all round.

"I take it for granted," he added, "that that is what your visit means, and that you represent Knaresby."

"Oh yes," answered Mrs. Scarth, laughing, "I hope I may say that I do. Naturally, I don't presume to represent my husband, who has never in his life been represented by anybody except himself."

"And cruelly misrepresented even then, as a rule," observed the priest, with a chuckle.

"Just so; his bark is worse than his bite. Only some people, you know, would rather be bitten than barked at, and poor Tom was one of them. Now tell me about Lord Lannowe. How odd it will seem to see little Monica taking her place at the head of his table!"

Under cover of the conversation which followed between Mrs. Scarth and Monsignor Nolan, the two younger people made mutual advances. They got on together better than might have been expected,

considering how little they had in common, and Bessie wound up by saying, in the plain language which it was her custom to employ—

"I shouldn't wonder if you were to turn out quite an acquisition. It is a mere question of showing yourself a good sportsman and spending money freely."

"I shall try to be as good a sportsman as I can," the young man promised, with his slow, rather wistful smile; "but I don't know so much about spending money. Don't you think that, under all the circumstances, it may rather behove me to save it?"

Bessie pursed up her lips and nodded. "Perhaps it may; yet, according to what my father says, Uncle Tom has left a very large fortune. I should think, in spite of death duties, you might contrive to do as much as Uncle Tom did and still lay by something out of income. Don't give people a chance to call you close-fisted, that's all."

She had further words of admonition at his service, to which he listened with amusement and not without edification. When she and her mother had taken their leave, after begging him to go over to Knaresby as soon and as often as he could find time, he turned to the burly priest, whose counsel was of far more importance to him than Miss Bessie's, and said—

"They evidently want to be kind. Do you think I had better respond or not?"

"Dear me, why not?" Monsignor Nolan returned. "You'll find them very decent people, and you may even manage to avoid quarrelling with your uncle; though it will be next door to a miracle if you do."

"Does he quarrel with everybody?" Nigel asked.

"No; there's one exception and, I believe, only one. By the way, has Mr. Trenchard called upon you yet?"

Nigel shook his head. "Who is Mr. Trenchard?"—

and why does Uncle Robert make an exception of him?"

"Ah, that's a sad story. Mr. Trenchard is a neighbour of yours who has the misfortune to be stone blind, and your uncle would die rather than say a cross word to him, because it was he who deprived the poor man of his sight many years ago by an unlucky shot. From that day to this Robert Scarth has never burnt another cartridge. He has been a hunting man ever since, which was one of the many pretexts that he discovered for falling foul of his brother, who was a shooting man. They pretended to be at variance upon religious questions, Tom being an Evangelical and Robert a High Churchman; but neither of them could forget a dispute they once had about a drowned fox-cub. They were crossing the stream down yonder by the larch covert together one day, when Robert pulled up on the bridge and, pointing to the water, 'Just look at that, now!' says he, in a mighty rage; 'so much for your smooth-tongued scoundrel of a keeper!' Tom peered down at the stream, which was muddy and running strong, after rain. 'I am not aware,' says he, 'that my keeper is in the habit of drowning mongrel puppies here, but if he does, he infringes no order of mine.' 'Puppies be hanged!' roars Robert. 'It's a fox-cub, and you know it is!' Well, they argued the point, getting hotter and hotter, as their way was, and at last Tom brought down his fist upon the rail with a bang. 'If that's a fox-cub,' says he, 'I swear I'll eat him raw, body and bones!' The words were hardly out of his mouth before Robert was wading waist-deep through the water, and presently a fine cub, with a stone round its neck, was flung into Tom's face. 'Now sit down on the bank and eat that,' he was told 'or else confess yourself a liar and a perjurer!'"

"Did he eat it?" Nigel inquired, much interested.

"He did not. If the thing had been possible, I do believe it would have been done ; but, as it was, Tom had to eat his words instead. And that, my dear sir, is why you are sitting in this room at this moment, with problems before you which nobody can call simple."

"Sometimes," sighed Nigel, "they look to me insoluble."

"I wouldn't say they were that ; matters are very much simplified for you by the large amount of cash that stands to your credit. Still, it's an equivocal position, and it can scarcely become less so as years go on."

"The question is whether I ought ever to have accepted it."

"Oh no," returned the priest, laughing ; "that's not the question any longer. For good or for ill, you have made your choice. But since you are the nephew of your uncles, let an old fellow warn you to be on your guard against behaving as you Scarths are very apt to do. You offer to eat fox-cubs, which can't be eaten, and so are driven to make a fantastic will, in order to avenge yourself upon the person who has humiliated you ; or you fire at a bird which isn't your bird, and so become converted into a blind man's dog for the rest of your days. These things are object lessons in prudence and self-control, my son."

CHAPTER VI

NIGEL'S NEIGHBOURS

THE joys of this world, like its sorrows, its successes and its disappointments, are transient. Happy the man who has finally renounced them all, and whose ordered, unalterable life can be affected no more by good or by evil fortune! Happy, nevertheless, and despite a renounced renunciation, must that young man needs be who, stepping forth into the sunshine on a morning of late spring or early summer, surveys wide stretches of land which own him as their master, and recognises, whether he will or no, that the lines have fallen to him in pleasant places. In vain did Nigel Scarth tell himself that he regretted the safe and peaceful cloister, that he dreaded temptations which he had not always been strong enough to resist and that he had only accepted a troublesome inheritance in the hope of serving the Church which he loved so much more than he did the world. All that might be quite true; but it was also true that interviews with the stud-groom and the head keeper had left him with a sense of exhilaration irrepressible at his age. It is no sin, after all, to be fond of sport, while many people who should be good judges consider it a merit. Monsignor Nolan was one of them. By his way of thinking—and he had in a very frank, good-humoured, friendly fashion stated what his way of thinking was—Nigel had nothing to

do but to live as other squires lived, while setting an unobtrusive example and keeping within his income. He did not advise parsimony, nor did he recommend any ostentatious religious zeal.

"You're only a tenant for life here," he remarked, "and your first duty is to see that the estate doesn't suffer during your tenancy. There's no reason why it should, for, between you and me, old Tom was a bit of a screw. He must have saved several thousands every year, and you should be able to do the same easily enough. You'll be bound to do it, indeed, as soon as you marry."

That the young man would marry his adviser assumed as a matter of course, almost implying even—or so it seemed to Nigel—that he had his eye upon the destined bride. Certainly propinquity, community of faith and suitability of age seemed to point to Monica Ferrand, and Monsignor Nolan, although he had not seen the young lady since her childhood, sang her praises with significant insistence. He likewise described her as being one of the acknowledged beauties of England, which was rather bold of him; but he had watched her sisters growing up, and no doubt he forgot that there are ugly ducklings in almost every brood. So, to sum up, Nigel's curiosity was stimulated, and the future seemed to smile at him, and he was reminded at every turn of the undeniable fact that he was young.

What used once upon a time to be known as "morning calls" are not generally paid in the morning; but perhaps a very old friend of the family deemed himself entitled to dispense with ceremony, and it was soon after mid-day that Nigel was summoned from the stables by a message to the effect that Mr. Trenchard was in the library and would like to see him, if he could spare time. In a literal sense, poor Mr. Trenchard

could see nobody. Nigel remembered that and, remembering also what he had been told as to the cause of his visitor's misfortune, was touched, when he returned to the house, by a spectacle which is always pathetic. That serenity of facial expression so unaccountably common amongst the blind was very noticeable in the case of this slim, refined-looking man with the closely-trimmed white beard. Noticeable also were the scrupulous neatness of his attire and his upright, almost youthful carriage. Nigel was struck, as most people were on first beholding Humphry Trenchard, by the irony of fate, which had deprived so well-preserved a man of the one faculty which is best worth preserving, and perhaps his compassion caused him to forget how the loss of one sense is apt to sharpen the others until they well nigh supply its place. It was, at any rate, rather startling, after taking Mr. Trenchard's extended hand, to hear him say, with a pleasant laugh :

"Yes ; but you must not pity me too much. I have educated myself ; I can read and write and ride and drive, with my man by my side ; I am by no means as helpless as I look. Added to which, I have an iron constitution. So I can't claim to be a great deal worse off than my neighbours, although I do sometimes put forward the claims of a privileged person. The proof that I do is my presuming to drop in upon you at this unconventional hour."

"You are very kind to come at all," the young man declared ; "it was I who was guilty of presumption by—by showing that I was sorry for you. But I don't know how——"

Mr. Trenchard laughed again. "Oh, I heard you draw in your breath ; I hear all manner of things that I am not meant to hear. I tell you this, so as to take no unfair advantage of you at starting ; for, as I live almost

at your gates, I hope our meetings may be frequent in days to come. I knew your uncle very well, though I cannot say that he was ever as close and dear a friend of mine as his brother Robert was and is. You are aware, of course, that Robert and he were, unfortunately, not the best of friends."

"I suppose, if they had been, I should not be where I am," Nigel remarked.

"Well, I suppose not. Although Tom Scarth was such a strange mortal that nobody could ever venture to predict what he would do under any circumstances. I did my best to make peace between the two brothers, and perhaps that was why Tom often quarrelled with me. I am not sure that he did not suspect me of scheming to secure his inheritance; for he was the most suspicious of men, and although he availed himself pretty freely of my help in the management of his estate, which he always kept in his own hands, he was never tired of reminding me that, as I was his senior by two years, he had every chance of outliving me. Well, he is gone, poor fellow, and here I still am. I wonder whether my experience is likely to be of any service to his successor."

"Of the greatest service, I am sure, if you will allow me to consult it," answered Nigel. "I am already beginning to discover that it is no simple matter to deal with a large estate for which neither land-agent nor land-steward has been employed for years. Being absolutely in the dark, I must trust somebody, and of course I am as likely as not to trust the wrong people."

"Well, you may safely trust me, and I may safely boast that I know every acre of your territory and every tenant upon it. There are some tenants of whom I am afraid you ought to get rid. John Bowden, for instance

—the present would be a good opportunity for giving John Bowden notice to quit.”

“I have heard a very bad account of him,” said Nigel.

“Yes ; he is letting the farm go to ruin, and his sons are poachers, and you will never get his arrears of rent out of him, I fear. But there are others, such as the Crossleys, for whom I should like to put in a plea. They have had very bad luck of late ; but they are doing what they can, and I think forbearance would be well bestowed there.”

He ran through a long list of names, showing that he had every detail connected with the estate at his fingers' ends, and displaying, as it seemed to Nigel, remarkably lucid judgment and discrimination in the advice that he offered. His voice and manner were those of a gentleman, and it was easy to see that he had intelligence and ability above the average. The dark glasses which concealed his sightless eyes were turned, while he was talking, towards his neighbour, who at moments could hardly believe that he was not looking through them ; for he seemed, by some swift intuition, to detect and respond to every change upon the latter's face. At the end of a colloquy which lasted nearly an hour and which was productive of certain definite results, he would not hear of being thanked for all his kindness.

“My dear boy,” said he—“if you will allow an old man to address you in that familiar way—I have done absolutely nothing to deserve your gratitude yet, although I hope to be of some little help to you in the long run. Even then you will be under no obligation to me. I am sure your quick wits must have told you how it is. I have been interested in this estate and concerned with it for so many years that I am as nervous and fussy about its being in new hands as if

I had created it ; and so I can't for the life of me help being officious."

"Your description of yourself," remarked Nigel, "is not very convincing."

"Well, well," said Mr. Trenchard, laughing and getting up, "call me kind, then, if you like, and ascribe my kindness to my affliction. For obvious reasons, the blind are always eager to oblige and reluctant to give offence. Haven't I just been urging you to have it out personally with John Bowden, while I have reserved for myself the pleasanter task of telling the Crossleys that you will grant them a respite? Oh, I am an old humbug ; ask your friend Cuthbert Gretton if I am not! Now may I beg you to touch the bell and summon my man to lead me away? Please remember that I live at a little place hard by, called Glen Cottage, and that it is an act of genuine charity to relieve my solitude."

Presently a deft, elderly attendant appeared and took Mr. Trenchard by the elbow. Nigel accompanied his visitor to the front door, where a dogcart, drawn by a big, powerful horse, was waiting, and was surprised to see him gather up the reins unhesitatingly. The butler, who, having been for many years in the employment of the late Mr. Scarth, permitted himself an old servant's liberties, noticed his new master's astonishment and observed :

"Remarkable man Mr. Trenchard, sir. Always in the dark, as you may say, but he knows his way about better than most of us, you may depend."

Without being in any way remarkable, he might know a good deal more about the duties of a large landed proprietor than the present holder of the Rixmouth estate, Nigel modestly thought. However, one lives and learns. Nigel had learnt something in the

past hour, and deemed himself singularly fortunate in that he might count for the future upon having so wise and capable a counsellor at his elbow. Yet, if he had been somewhat sobered by what had been said to him, if his sense of responsibility and consciousness of inadequate equipment had been deepened, he still felt that wealth has its compensations. It was pleasant to order his horse that afternoon, (he had already selected a hack highly recommended for manners by the stud-groom), and canter across the sunny, breezy stretches of the park with no other object than air and exercise in view. Some day soon he would have to keep the promise that he had made to Mr. Trenchard and give notice to that worthless old Bowden—Bowden, whose shabby hat had been flung into the air, with those of other tenants, to welcome him on his arrival, and who, in loud, if somewhat thick accents, had called upon Heaven to bless him. That would be an extremely disagreeable job; but it admitted, surely, of brief postponement.

"Let me enjoy myself just for today!" the poor young man pleaded to his conscience, which was a troublesome and exacting one.

He really could not help enjoying himself. It was delightful to be in the saddle once more and to recognise that, although he might not be much of a horseman, he had not forgotten the little that he had been taught; delightful to meet the rushing wind which swept down from the adjacent moors, delightful to smell the golden gorse, delightful, above all, to be free! Then his inexorable conscience lifted up its voice and wanted to know what he meant by that. Had he not been happy in his voluntary thralldom? Was he glad to be released from the peace and security which he had chosen? Did he imagine that any mortal is really free?—or that he,

of all mortals, was fitted to dispense with authority? He hung his head and shook it. In his exaggeratedly scrupulous fashion he was for ever suspecting the devil of being at his ear, always defiant of instincts innocent enough in themselves.

He was wondering despondently whether human instincts are ever innocent when he was startled out of his meditations by a plunge on the part of his horse which went uncommonly near to depositing him on the sandy road which he had reached by this time. A whizzing, whooping motor-car dashed by; its owners glanced over their shoulders to grin at him, after the manner of their kind, and he showed what a good Christian and good Catholic he was by saying never a word. Possibly he may have had thoughts; most of us have had thoughts concerning motor-cars and the charming, unselfish creatures who drive them.

Now, Lord Lannowe, in addition to being a Christian and a Catholic, was, as any number of living witnesses would gladly testify, one of the best-tempered and most courteous men in the world; but he had, when excited, a fine flow of language at command, and it so chanced that Nigel's first view of him exhibited him as a perfectly furious old gentleman, shaking his fist and hurling imprecations at an invisible offender over the back of a runaway pony-chaise. The young lady who was tugging vainly at the reins had lost her hat—perhaps also her head—and the upset which promptly followed was only what might have been expected on a rough road, furrowed by deep cart-ruts. Fortunately, the road was a soft, as well as a rough one, and the scattered occupants of the pony-chaise escaped with nothing worse than a shaking. The groom, who had landed neatly on his hands and knees, ran at once to the ponies' heads; neither bones nor pole nor harness were

broken, and Nigel perceived that assistance from him was not required, save to the extent of getting off his horse and retrieving the young lady's hat, which he did. She thanked him prettily and shyly, while wiping the sand out of her eyes; but her father was still too indignant to take notice of bystanders.

"I'll summons that fellow!" he shouted; "as sure as he's born I will! I don't quite know what pace the law allows to those infernal machines, but I'm certain they can't be allowed to tear along byways at the rate of thirty miles an hour. Run after him, James, as hard as you can go and take his name and address. I'll hold the ponies."

The groom touched his hat, but did not immediately obey orders. "I'm afraid they've got rather too long a start, my lord," he ventured to remark. "Perhaps, if this gentleman would be so kind as to allow me to borrow his horse——"

"Certainly," said Nigel, with alacrity; "off you go!"

He might have offered to undertake the pursuit himself; but he did not wish to lose so favourable an occasion for making acquaintance with Lord Lannowe and Miss Ferrand, whose identity he had guessed and who were not slow to recognise his own. Lord Lannowe, who soon cooled down, was full of thanks and neighbourly civility.

"We have heard all about you from Monsignor Nolan, Mr. Scarth," said he, "and I was promising myself the pleasure of calling upon you in a day or two to welcome you to these parts. We begin effusively by casting ourselves at your feet, you see! But really something will have to be done about these abominable motors; it's downright scandalous!"

"I think it is," Nigel agreed. "You must have

encountered the same ruffian who nearly sent me flying a few minutes before."

"Oh, he did, did he? Then you'll bear me out, I hope, in the assertion that he was raging along like a lunatic. It's true that he hasn't killed us, nor even smashed our trap; but we don't owe him any thanks for that."

Nigel thought, but did not say, that he personally might have some reason for feeling grateful to the culprit. If Miss Ferrand was scarcely as beautiful as Monsignor Nolan had led him to expect, she was, to his sense, undeniably attractive, and her somewhat old-fashioned modesty and timidity gave her an additional charm in the eyes of one who had learnt to regard women generically as the embodiment of danger and temptation. He had a little talk with her while her father mounted the adjoining hillside to scan the horizon, in the hope of descrying the fugitives, and he found her conversation as simple and winning as her face.

"Don't you feel very lonely all by yourself in that great house?" she asked, with an innocence of intention which made him smile. "I remember once being taken to Rixmouth Castle when I was a child, and I have never forgotten how huge it seemed to me."

"Perhaps," answered Nigel, "I don't feel the size or the solitude of it as much as I should if I hadn't been a rather lonely sort of person all my life. I had no brothers or sisters, I never saw much of my father, and the few friends of my youth have either dropped me or been dropped by me. The life of a Benedictine is solitary, too, though it is spent in community. I dare say you know that I left Lew Abbey to take up this inheritance."

The girl looked at him with curious, commiserating eyes.

"I wonder why you did!" she exclaimed, half-involuntarily. "You were not obliged, were you?"

"No; but—I was not dissuaded. I think Father Abbot wished me to decide as I did, although he would not say so. I think it was probably the right thing to do."

"Perhaps you had no vocation?" Monica hazarded.

He responded with a frown and a short sigh; for she had unwittingly laid her finger upon a sore spot.

"Perhaps not," he answered; "no man can judge of that for himself. All I know is that I believe the religious life to be the happiest of all lives."

She was disposed to agree with him there, and indeed they speedily discovered that they were of one mind upon many points. Great progress towards friendship or intimacy or even love may be made in the course of ten minutes, and fully that length of time had elapsed before Lord Lannowe descended from his post of observation to announce that James was returning.

"He gave me a signal which, I am afraid, meant that he has not been successful. I only hope he hasn't taken too much out of your horse, Mr. Scarth."

The horse, when he reappeared, looked as if he had been ridden rather hard, and the groom was duly apologetic, apologising also for his failure to overtake the motorists. But there were three high roads in the vicinity, he explained, and very likely he had chosen the wrong one.

"Ah, well," said Lord Lannowe, with whom anger was always a brief emotion, "we must see what can be done by giving information to the police. Now, Monica, my dear, we ought to be getting home. I hope it won't be very long before you find your way to Lannowe, Mr. Scarth; we shall be charmed to see you any day. Perhaps I ought to say that I shall be charmed; for my daughter is about to desert me, alas!"

"Indeed!" ejaculated Nigel, somewhat blankly. It was, of course, absurd of him to be dismayed by this unexpected piece of intelligence, but he was almost dismayed.

"Yes, she is going up to her sister in London to make her *début* and be introduced to the gay world. The world isn't so gay as it used to be, in my opinion, so I propose to stay quietly at home; but I daresay it won't disappoint her."

"I should like to stay at home too, if I could choose," Miss Ferrand said.

"Only of course you can't choose, my dear," returned her father, laughing and patting her on the shoulder. "Does Frances ever allow anybody the impertinence of choice? No; I must get on as well as I can without you until the end of July; but if you aren't back by then I shall begin to growl."

They drove away, leaving Nigel pensive. If he had not fallen in love with Monica Ferrand at first sight, he had at least taken a strong fancy to her and had seen in her exactly the girl whom he would wish to make his wife, should it be—as everybody seemed agreed that it was—his destiny to marry. She was visibly good, she had given some indications of religious fervour, she was modest, simple and doubtless affectionate. What more could any man desire? But it was a sad and unavoidable reflection that a few weeks might convert her into a very different person. What school and college are to one sex introduction to society is to the other. The young ones must go through the mill and take their chance; there is no help for it. But Nigel was unreasonable enough to be angry with Lord Lannowe for allowing it, angry with Monica's sister for insisting upon it, even a little angry with himself for being utterly impotent in the matter. For a moment it occurred to him that he also

might betake himself to the metropolis, so as to be near her, to see her sometimes, and possibly to breathe an occasional discreet word of warning in her ear. However, he put that rather fantastic notion away from him hurriedly. London?—he could never dare! For to him London symbolised perils more grave than any that Monica was likely to encounter, and he had a profound distrust of himself which was not entirely without justification. So he concluded, with a species of pious fatalism, that what was to be would be, and that the Christian virtues of Faith and Hope became him best. Perhaps there might be scope for the exercise of Charity at a later date.

CHAPTER VII

THE DUCHESS'S FAILURE

THE inclusion of the Duke of Leith's name in several Cabinets may puzzle future students of English history ; although, seeing that history is full of names which have lost all meaning, this has perhaps been a still greater puzzle to his Grace's contemporaries. Permanent officials, groaning under the fussy interference of this ill-informed, crotchety and priest-ridden little man, were wont to declare that he was made a plague to their respective departments in acknowledgment of his large contributions to the party funds ; other people ascribed his tenure of office to the circumstance that he possessed a beautiful wife ; nobody supposed, or could suppose, that he had achieved distinction in public life by means of ability. The truth probably was that, as he knew how to make himself extremely disagreeable, it would be just like him, in the event of his being left out of any administration, to plump himself down upon the cross-benches, in an appropriately cross frame of mind, and give no end of bother. Moreover, when all was said, he was a duke, and his title and his wife were decorative, if he himself, with his stubbly beard, his shaven upper lip and his untidy attire, was not.

The Duchess, of course, was charming, and at her official receptions in St. James's Square, which were always largely attended, she made ample amends for

the surliness of her spouse, who seldom had a civil word for anybody, save for dignitaries of the Church to which he belonged. How intensely those receptions bored her her smiling countenance never betrayed, and it must be recorded to her credit that, although she was neither clever nor particularly amiable, she contrived to convey to the majority of her guests the impression that she was both. To one unexpected guest who climbed her staircase on a certain evening in the last days of June she accorded a welcome which was doubtless as sincere as it was warm.

"You, of all people!" she exclaimed. "Where have you dropped from? And how nice of you to drop from anywhere!"

"I suppose," Colonel Gervase remarked, "it is something of a drop to be relegated to private life; yet obscurity has its compensations, and I was sick of Paris. I only arrived last night, so I have lost no time in paying my respects, you see."

He never did. He had for so many years been the humble servant and devoted friend of the woman by whom he had once been somewhat ignobly jilted that his allegiance had become a second nature to him, and he accepted the occasional discomforts entailed therein as one accepts shaving every morning, answering letters, paying bills and other inevitable incidents of existence. Letting his eyes wander down the long room, which was as full as it could hold, he recognised a host of familiar faces; amongst them those of the Duchess's beautiful sisters, Lady Bracebridge, whose husband, one of the magnates of the turf, owned half a county, and Mrs. Maltby, the wife of the great brewer, with a diamond crown upon her head before the size and splendour of which all surrounding jewels paled their ineffectual fires. He could fancy the spirit of the late Lady Lannowe

hovering contentedly over that assemblage, with its visible testimony to a life's work worthily accomplished.

"You saw poor little Monica in Paris, I hear," the Duchess said.

The Duchess had been talking for some minutes, but he had only been listening to her with half an ear. At the sound of Monica's name, however, he looked round and smiled.

"Oh, yes," he answered. "I had a glimpse of her and of your father. How is she getting on under your care? I thought her very taking."

The Duchess threw up her hands and broke into a loud, rather shrill laugh.

"Very taking! What an extraordinary thing to say about her, poor child! No; whatever she may be, I am afraid she isn't that. Indeed, to tell you the truth, I despair of her. Not one of them will have anything to say to her—and you know how few there are of them!"

"How few eligible Catholics, you mean."

"Yes; and she won't try a bit. Her being so disappointing in the way of looks might not matter so much if she had the least idea of—of—making herself attractive in other ways; but those convents!— It was the greatest mistake in the world to educate her like a French girl."

"No doubt the nuns mean well; but one can understand their being ignorant of the sort of instruction which is so essential for social success in this country," observed Gervase drily.

"That's just it," agreed the Duchess, who never indulged in irony herself and seldom suspected others of that disagreeable habit. "She is a dear, good little soul; only she is a fish out of water here, and she doesn't even enjoy herself. I have a great mind to make her happy by sending her home. There is this

young man who has just been pitchforked out of a monastery into Rixmouth Castle and who might do. I don't see why he shouldn't."

"I don't see why he should," said Gervase.

"Well, somebody must be found, you know. Perhaps you would like to marry her yourself."

"My age forbids," answered Gervase. Then, perceiving that the Duchess, who was only his junior by a year or two, did not like that, he hastened to add, "Besides, you know why I shall live and die a bachelor."

Such speeches always pleased her, and it was worth while to please her; for she was apt to become unmanageable when thwarted, as her husband was well aware. She tapped the faithful Colonel lightly on the shoulder with her fan, laughed and exclaimed:

"What a goose you are, Ned!"

"Very likely I am," he returned, "and very likely poor little Monica is another. After all, there are people who like geese."

"Only at Michaelmas, and not then if they have any pretension to good taste. I know exactly what you are thinking in your romantic way; but really girls can't afford to be romantic. I do hope you won't go and put such notions into her head."

Colonel Gervase did not flatter himself that he was capable of imbuing any young lady with romantic notions, and he remembered that Monica was a Ferrand, in spite of her having been brought up in a French convent. Nevertheless, he thought he would give her a metaphorical pat on the back; for he surmised that she might stand in need of some sympathy and support. Presently, therefore, he sought her out, and her face lighted up as soon as she caught sight of him.

"I didn't know you were in London. It is so nice to meet a friend again!" was her ingenuous greeting.

"Are all the others so hostile, then?" he asked.

"No," she answered hesitatingly; "they are not that; but they talk about things that I don't understand and people of whom I have never heard, and the consequence is that—that I don't get on."

"So your sister has been telling me."

"Has she?" asked Monica anxiously. "Did she tell you that she was out of patience with me? I know she is, though she is too kind to say so."

"I am not sure that she is too kind to be so. These people, who, as you say, only care to talk about a small stock of trivial subjects, are too stupid to have patience with outsiders like you and me. One must be as dull-witted as they are to live with them. Fortunately, it isn't a duty to live with them."

Monica, who was under the impression that it was, or might become, her duty to do so, looked pensive and contrite.

"They don't amuse me," she confessed. "I thought perhaps they would, but they don't, and it is only too evident that I don't amuse them. I can't help hoping that I shall end in a convent."

"I can't help hoping," returned Gervase, with a laugh, "that you will do no such thing. But I'll tell you what I believe might be managed, now that your presentation is over and that you have attended a sufficient number of functions; I believe you might be allowed to return home to your father."

"Oh, do you think so?" cried the girl, clasping her hands and drawing in her breath.

He replied that he had not a doubt of it, and in truth he had none. Knowing his Frances as he did, he was aware of how little she was likely to relish retaining a failure upon her hands and how gracefully she would consent to resign irksome responsibilities. He said :

"I will speak to the Duchess presently and make it all right. You would rather go home than stay in London, then?"

"Oh, so very much rather! The only thing is that father may think I ought to have stayed here longer."

"Not unless he has changed his mind since he wrote to me last week. He described himself then as a forlorn and deserted old man and said he was longing for you to come back. If he hasn't said as much in writing to you, that was only because he was afraid of spoiling your holiday."

"But holidays are spent at home," Monica declared. "That is," she added, remembering bygone holidays, "when one has a home to go to. I always used to dream of Lannowe and wish myself back there in the summer, and it is just as delightful as I hoped it would be."

She described her home life, so far as it had gone, and although it did not sound particularly exciting or exhilarating, she declared that she asked for nothing better. There were upon the estate a certain number of poor people of her own faith and there was a certain amount of work to be done amongst them; besides which she had her household duties, for which it seemed that she possessed some aptitude. Incidentally she mentioned Nigel Scarth as a neighbour who promised to be interesting, and related the episode whereby she had been made acquainted with him. At this Gervase pricked up his ears.

"Ah, the unfrocked monk!" said he. "One has a sort of prejudice, somehow, against unfrocked monks."

"But he was never a monk," Monica protested rather eagerly, "and he would not have left the community if he had not been led to believe that it was his duty. He thinks, as I do, that the religious life is the happiest of

all lives ; he would not have given it up unless he had been obliged."

"Probably his self-sacrifice will be rewarded," observed Gervase. Then, feeling a little ashamed of speaking in that tone about a man of whom he knew nothing, he added : " Free will, after all, is such a restricted gift that one may very well doubt whether it really exists at all."

" I don't covet it," the girl said ; " I would always rather be told what to do."

She was told what to do at that juncture by the Duke of Leith, who bustled up and said, in a complaining voice :

" I wish to goodness, Monica, you would go and look whether I have left my spectacles in the library or in the dining-room. What is the use of people coming and thrusting letters under my nose when I can't possibly read them ?"

He spoke as if Monica had been to blame for his defective eyesight ; but that was his usual method, and his colleagues, who were accustomed to it, recognised that for purposes of defence it was not without merits.

" Did you ever," he asked, as soon as the girl had obediently departed on her errand, " see anybody so unlike her sisters as that child ?"

" She is not very much like them," Gervase agreed.

" Oh, I'm not reproaching her ; I merely state a fact which must be apparent to everybody. And then Lord Lannowe expects us to make a great marriage for her !"

" Perhaps," said Gervase, " he is not so unreasonable as all that ; perhaps he would be as glad to have her home again as she would be to return to him. I was talking about it to the Duchess just now, and she seemed to think that Miss Ferrand has been long enough in London."

"Oh, very well—very well!" grumbled the Duke; "settle it amongst you. Monica has made herself useful to me in many ways of late, and I shall be sorry to lose her; but my convenience is the last thing that is likely to be studied."

When the Duke of Leith represented any course of action in the light of a personal grievance it might safely be assumed that that course had his secret approval, and Gervase, on resuming his conversation with the Duchess, felt pretty confident of obtaining the desired release for his young friend. The Duchess, who had concealed herself behind a large fan in order to yawn unrestrainedly, said at once:

"I am so glad you agree with me! I have done my best—you can bear witness that I have done my best."

"I am sure you have."

"Yes; but I can't create a demand which doesn't exist, can I? And really the more I think of it the more I feel that that young Scarth is marked out for her by Providence."

"Well—if she thinks so."

"She doesn't think anything; that is the best of convents. One sees what the worst of them is, and it is some comfort to perceive that their system has at least a few advantages. I'll just mention it in writing to my father."

"If you will be advised by me," said Gervase, "you won't do that. According to you, Providence has taken the job in hand, and Providence stands in no need of being backed up. The most promising schemes are liable to be wrecked by premature or injudicious furtherance."

For some reason which he might have found it difficult to formulate, he did not consider that particular scheme a very promising one, nor was he anxious that

it should be pushed forward either by Providence or by less potent forces. What he did want—so he told himself—was that poor little Monica should be granted some breathing space in which to enjoy her youth and her freedom. After all, women are not sent into this world simply and solely in order to get married. But the Duchess, being of a different opinion, said :

“It would be almost criminal to let such a chance escape us. The young man is tremendously well off, isn't he?”

Colonel Gervase, who was not acquainted with the provisions of the late Mr. Scarth's will, did not know, but supposed so. “Only,” he observed, “that would make the young man all the more likely to choose for himself. I don't see what you can do beyond what circumstances are certain to do, without your help.”

The Duchess nodded, yawned once more and agreed that there was something in that.

“If she isn't disposed of before the autumn, we must have her to stay with us in Scotland. More marriages are made in country houses than in London, I am sure. By the way, you are coming to us, aren't you?”

“Yes, if you want me,” answered Gervase, rather wearily.

There were moments when he was very weary of the Duchess. Perhaps he was always weary of her, although he could not be such a traitor to the past as to admit it. Everything passes; happy are those amongst us who go down to their graves without having realised that inexorable truth.

CHAPTER VIII

TEMPERED SOLITUDE

DURING his quarter of a century's sojourn in this world Nigel Scarth had formed intimacies with very few men and with no women. Of the latter monastic training and certain youthful experiences had made him timorously defiant; but he began to long for such companionship on the part of his own sex as could scarcely be provided by old Mr. Trenchard or by his uncle Robert, and he was therefore much pleased when the post brought him, one morning, an intimation that Cuthbert Gretton proposed to run down and spend a day or two with him. This was the reply to a diffident invitation which he had despatched, but from which he had not ventured to look for any immediate result. Although he had been fond of Cuthbert once upon a time, and although Cuthbert had seemed to have a liking for him, he could not expect his former friend's memory of old days to be as vivid as his own; so that the hurriedly written, but very cordial and hearty, letter which he read through several times brought a gratified smile to his lips.

After breakfast he went out for a ride, in accordance with what had become his daily custom, and was conscious of somewhat higher spirits than he had enjoyed of late. The estate and the cares connected with it had, in truth, been giving him rather more trouble than he had anticipated, notwithstanding the ever-ready advice

and experience of Mr. Trenchard, which he had found invaluable, and he was painfully aware that he had not thus far won popularity. For the rest, he had been more than a little lonely, an occasional visit to Knaresby, in the absence of Miss Bessie, who was away from home, having failed to afford him much enlivenment. He was jogging quietly along one of the shady lanes which bordered a part of his property when he was hailed by another equestrian, smart in white riding-breeches and a Panama hat. This was Lord Lannowe, who also had been away, but who had now returned, and who looked as glad to be at home once more as he presently stated that he was.

"No place like it," he genially remarked. "I hope you're of the same mind, Mr. Scarth, even though you haven't been sent into honourable banishment for four years, and though you aren't old enough yet to have a daughter to keep you company."

"Is Miss Ferrand with you again, then?" asked Nigel, with a suggestion of eagerness in his voice.


"She will be this evening, I am glad to say. She has the bad taste, with which I don't quarrel, to prefer Yorkshire to London, it appears. And how do you like Yorkshire, as far as you have got?"

"I think," answered Nigel, smiling, "I should like it better if I had not quite so many acres of it under my control."

Lord Lannowe glanced at him shrewdly and sympathetically.

"Ah, yes, that's where the shoe pinches! You have been making acquaintance with some of a landowner's worries, I hear. I'm rather sorry about Bowden, if you'll excuse my saying so."

"He was ruining the farm; it was absolutely necessary to get rid of him," Nigel said.



"You think so? Well, of course I am no judge; I have been too long away. But he used to be a decent enough fellow in some respects, and he has had bad luck with his sons, who, I grant you, are scamps. Your uncle, I believe, always refused to disturb him."

Nigel looked distressed. "What I did," said he, "was done with Mr. Trenchard's full approval, and indeed at his suggestion."

"What, old blind Humphry? So it was his suggestion, was it? Well, he is an able man, and he has always borne a high character for benevolence into the bargain. As a general rule, I should think you might expect sound advice from him. Only you see, my dear fellow, people of our faith must bear in mind that we start handicapped; I am constantly having to bear it in mind myself. There is an unreasoning prejudice against us which we can't hope to overcome, and whenever we disoblige anybody we may rest assured that he will suspect the Pope or the Jesuits of being at our elbow."

"But surely one must do one's duty!" Nigel pleaded. "I don't know what is the use of me except to see that the estate does not deteriorate in value while it is in my hands."

"I daresay other reasons than that might be discovered for your existence," returned Lord Lannowe, laughing; "still you are right, of course, in wishing to do the best you can for the property. All I wanted to take the liberty of impressing upon you was that Catholics can very easily make themselves hated in this part of the world, and that your predecessor happened to be a rather aggressive Protestant. I should try to avoid provoking comparisons if I were you. Won't you come over and lunch with us tomorrow? Then you might have a talk with Nolan, whose opinion is always

worth having ; and you can also hear my daughter's first impressions of London society, which are sure to be entertaining."

Lord Lannowe, after he had touched his cob with his heel and had trotted off, waving a friendly hand, left his young neighbour with a good deal to think about. Nigel had thought a good deal about Monica Ferrand during long hours of solitude, and he could not but rejoice to hear how little London had appealed to her. Perhaps he went rather too far in taking her father's invitation as a sign that matrimonial advances on his part would not be unwelcome ; but he was certainly justified in assuming that Lord Lannowe wished him well. What was not quite so pleasant was that hint that he had not managed to produce a favourable impression upon his tenantry. This, to be sure, was no news to him ; he was too sensitive to evidences of favour or disfavour, too anxious to be liked and too apt to be despondent when he was not, for any illusion upon that subject to be within his capacity. Yet there is a difference between realising melancholy facts and hearing them announced by somebody else.

"It isn't certain," murmured the young man dejectedly, "it isn't a bit certain that I did well to leave the Abbey."

Of course it was not, unless he had courage enough to make light of the initial opposition for which every new proprietor must be prepared. He addressed some inward exhortations to himself, deriving a little comfort from them, and he was able to take a moderately hopeful view of the future by the time that he reached Lannowe on the following day. Beneath the classic portico of that spacious, but not very imposing white edifice he encountered Monsignor Nolan, who said :

"I'm the more glad to see you because I presume

we'll get something to eat presently. I had a sick call the first thing this morning, besides having to say Mass five miles away, and I'm fasting since my dinner last night. Who says domestic chaplains do no work?"

"Does anybody say so?" asked Nigel.

"Indeed I don't know what they won't say. Haven't they been accusing you of giving notice to a tenant because he is a Methodist or a Baptist or something? I forget what he is, and I wouldn't like to swear that he himself remembers."

"Has Lord Lannowe been telling you about Bowden?" Nigel inquired.

"He did. But there was no need; for I had heard the whole story from other quarters. Don't worry yourself about it. The truth is that the people hereabouts are not to be conciliated in a day, and if they didn't blame you for one thing, they would for another. Any stick is good enough to beat a dog with."

"That is rather cold comfort," observed Nigel, smiling ruefully.

"It's all I can give you. Be just, and you'll get your reward in the long run."

"If only one could be sure of being always just!"

"Ah, then you wouldn't be mortal. We can but try, and the best plan I know is to look into everything personally, taking plenty of time about it. Heaven has granted you the blessing of sight—which has been denied to Mr. Trenchard, remember."

"I sometimes think that he sees more than many men who have the full use of their eyes," remarked Nigel.

Monsignor Nolan drew his hand once or twice across his chin; he had not had time to shave that morning.

"So do I," he returned at length somewhat drily.

"All the same, I wouldn't ask him to lead me along a

tight-rope. Now, for pity's sake, come into the house and let a famishing man have a chance!"

In the long saloon, which the late Lady Lannowe, a woman of considerable taste, had embellished with many beautiful specimens of old furniture, silver and porcelain, Monica was sitting on a footstool beside her father, whose hand rested upon her shoulder. She jumped up, blushing a little, although there was nothing to blush about, when Nigel entered, and said, with that slight foreign accent which was always noticeable in her enunciation when she felt shy :

"How do you do, Mr. Scarth? I hope you are very well?"

Nigel, being an Englishman and being also somewhat shy, had not much to say in answer to her greeting. It was reserved for Monsignor Nolan, who was a Celt, to remark :

"The sight of you, Miss Monica, makes us all feel a great deal better than we did. As for his lordship, he's ten years younger since yesterday."

Lord Lannowe rubbed his hands and did not contradict the assertion.

"I am contented," he declared. "My ewe lamb has been restored to me, and she comes back just as she was when she left, which is a little more than I had dared to hope for. Monica has no opinion of fine ladies or of fine gentlemen either, she tells me."

"I think it was they who had no opinion of me," the girl demurely corrected.

"Put it any way you please, my dear ; the result remains equally satisfactory to us both. Anyhow, they have not spoilt you amongst them, nor, I am glad to notice, have they persuaded you to claw your hair down over your ears in the hideous modern style."

Monica laughed and seemed much amused. "Oh,

but one does not do that!" she protested. "It is evident that you arrive from India, my dear papa."

With her father, at all events, she had ceased to be timid. During luncheon, a ceremony rendered a trifle pompous by the presence of four servants (for Lord Lannowe's establishment had always been maintained upon a footing out of proportion to his means), they had many little mild jokes together, and were indeed absorbed in one another to an extent which might have irritated their guest, had he not been a stranger to personal vanity. As it was, he was pleased and fascinated by this by-play, which, to his sense, exhibited the girl in a singularly attractive light. If anybody had told him that he was struggling heroically to fall in love with her, he would have been much astonished. He was not aware of doing any such thing; only he did every minute become more and more conscious that, if he were ever to have a bride, he would like her to resemble Miss Ferrand. Women, by his way of thinking, were either angels or—quite the reverse. By all accounts, the majority of them were quite the reverse; his own experience lent support to that view; and it therefore followed that the man who should win Monica Ferrand's heart and hand would be an exceptionally fortunate man.

It cannot be said that much excuse was given him for imagining that he himself was destined to be thus exceptionally fortunate. Immediately after luncheon Lord Lannowe took his daughter away into the garden, remarking:

"Now, Mr. Scarth, we'll leave you and Monsignor to your coffee and your cigarettes. I know you want to have a chat with him." And although this was not what Nigel wanted, he was fain to acquiesce.

However, it was not very long before he effected his escape; for Monsignor Nolan, who had said all that he

wished and meant to say respecting the Rixmouth estate and who confessed to being drowsy, was fast asleep in less than a quarter of an hour. Then Nigel rose and, stepping out softly through the open glass doors which gave access to a broad terrace, descried Monica beneath him, standing bareheaded in a sunk rose-garden, while at a distance of a hundred yards or so Lord Lannowe could be seen engaged in conference with the head gardener. He made haste to join her, and announced that he had come to say goodbye. She did not ask him to remain longer, but she did smile pleasantly upon him, and, in reply to a deferential suggestion of his, she said that she would enjoy very much indeed going over to tea with him one day when her father should be free to take her to Rixmouth. There was only time for the exchange of a few entirely commonplace observations before Lord Lannowe interrupted the colloquy ; yet Nigel went off in good spirits. He felt again, as he had done on the occasion of his sole previous interview with Monica, that there was a tacit sympathy between them, and he was glad to believe that she, too, recognised its existence. Moreover, he participated most heartily in her father's joy that London had neither changed nor spoilt her.

"Well, we shall see," he said to himself. And then once more, with that recurrent fatalism which his creed seems almost to enjoin, "If it is to be, it will be."

Cuthbert Gretton's arrival, that evening, seemed not unlike the fulfilment of a decree of Providence ; for, being a young man with plenty of common sense, he was just the sort of confidant whom his host most urgently needed. He could not see that there was anything to be miserable about in having shunted a bad tenant, nor was he disposed to attach much importance to alleged sectarian animosity.

"Oh, you'll be right enough, old chap," he reassuringly declared; "don't fret yourself. Nobody can expect to get settled in the saddle without a little bucking and fidgeting at the start; but all you have to do is to sit tight. There are worse things, after all, than being in possession of a fine property, which has always been pretty carefully looked after, I believe. Show yourself a good sportsman and I'll undertake to promise that you won't have much trouble with your tenants or your neighbours."

"That was my cousin Bessie's view," Nigel remarked, smiling.

"Was it? Well, I am humbly rejoiced to find myself in agreement with her for once; it isn't every day that I am so far honoured. The fact is that in this part of the world nothing is of quite so much importance as being able to ride or shoot, or do both, if possible. Of course, if you were a cricketer, that would be all the better; but you never went in for cricket, did you?"

Nigel shook his head mournfully. "I have had so few opportunities of going in for anything! As far as sport is concerned, though, I am eager to qualify."

Cuthbert cheerily affirmed that that was the main thing.

"Want to do it and you'll do it. The people who fail in this world are the half-hearted beggars, and it never was your way to do things by halves."

That description of him was somewhat over-flattering, Nigel thought; yet there was enough of truth in it to make it pleasant, and what was an unalloyed pleasure was to find that Cuthbert was willing to resume their bygone intimacy as though it had never been interrupted. The two young men had many reminiscences to exchange and laugh over; their talk, after the first quarter of an hour, related, not unnaturally, to episodes

of Oxford life rather than to events more recent and less easy of discussion.

"Do you know, Gretton," said Nigel, while they were smoking together in the billiard-room in the evening (old Tom Scarth had never allowed a cigar or a pipe to be lighted in his house and would have been horrified at the idea of such an institution as a smoking-room), "it's a queer thing, but you aren't altered a bit."

"Why should I be?" asked the other, who was upon the point of returning the compliment, but thought better of it and held his peace. To tell Nigel that there was no perceptible difference between his present and his former self would be scarcely a compliment, perhaps. Perhaps also it would not be true.

"I suppose," answered the latter, "that when one has gone through so complete a transformation as I have, one is apt to feel surprised that the rest of the world should remain just the same."

"I should think you would have been even more surprised if we had all gone over to Rome in a body, wouldn't you?" asked his friend, laughing.

"That is what you will all end by doing!" cried Nigel, his eyes flashing and his whole face suddenly lighting up. "Oh, not literally you, perhaps; it may take a generation, or several generations. But that England will return eventually to the only true Church is certain."

"I should have thought," observed his friend, somewhat taken aback by this unexpected outburst, "that nothing was more antecedently improbable."

"I daresay that few things are more apparently improbable; it was most improbable, upon the face of it, I suppose, that Christianity would ever conquer the entire civilised world. But faith doesn't concern itself with probability."

"Well," said Cuthbert goodhumouredly, "every man has a right to his faith, not to speak of his visions. I wouldn't mention yours to Uncle Robert, though, if you want to keep the peace. He passes for a High Churchman; but I suspect that is chiefly because his brother was a rabid Evangelical, and I am quite sure he wouldn't stand being told that he would have to kiss the Pope's toe some day. How have you got on with him up to now?"

"I haven't seen him often; when I have he has been—rather rude," answered Nigel, with a sigh.

"Only rather? At that rate, he must have taken a fancy to you, I should think. Not a bad old fellow, all the same, when once you have got into the way of not minding him. I believe he does a lot of good and gives away a lot of money on the sly; only of course he accompanies his doles with kicks, which some people don't like. I must go and look them up at Knaresby tomorrow, by the way, or I shall never be forgiven. You'll come, won't you?"

On the following afternoon, which was fine and hot, the two young men paid their visit, and found the whole family, consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Scarth, their daughter and a couple of handsome, long-legged sons, who were on leave for a day or two from their respective regiments, drinking tea under a tent in the garden. Old Mr. Trenchard also was reclining in a low chair at his host's elbow and smiling benevolently upon the circle.

"This is capital!" he cried, recognising the newcomers at the first sound of their voices. "Well, my dear Cuthbert, and how is the world treating you? Giving yourself a little holiday, eh? Quite right!—quite wise! Everybody works the better for an occasional break."

"I fail to see," remarked Mr. Scarth acidly, "how it can be wise for a barrister who wishes to make his

living to absent himself from the Law Courts at this time of year."

"Great as the pressure of my business is," returned Cuthbert goodhumouredly, "I can sometimes make arrangements to leave it for a couple of days. Besides, I wanted to see Nigel, who wanted to see me."

Mr. Scarth opened his lips with the evident intention of making a sharp rejoinder ; but old Humphry laid a restraining hand upon his wrist.

"Let the young ones see what and whom they want to see, Robert," said he; "I suppose there will always be things which we old ones must fail to see. Some of us, indeed," he added, with a light shrug of his shoulders, "are precluded from ever seeing anything or anybody again in this world."

Mr. Scarth's face softened instantly and an expression of pain came over it which moved Nigel, who was watching him, to compassion. It was not often that old Humphry alluded to his calamity ; as a general rule he affected, like many blind people, to ignore it, and was fond of pointing to objects, as though he could distinguish them. But on the rare occasions when he did so in the presence of the man whose misfortune it had been to deprive him of the blessing of sight the effect was immediate and invariable. Doubtless he knew that, and perhaps he was actuated in this instance by a kindly wish to restore harmony between Mr. Scarth and the two young sons, who had, as usual, been asking for money and had consequently (so one of them afterwards confided to Nigel) been "putting in a devil of a time."

Be that as it may, Mr. Scarth, after an interval of pensive silence, began to talk quite civilly and almost deferentially to one of his nephews, while the other soon became involved in a somewhat noisy verbal battle with Bessie and her brothers. Miss Bessie, it seemed, had

been over at Lannowe, where she had heard all about Cuthbert's visit to Paris and a good deal about Miss Dallison, respecting whom she chaffed him without mercy.

"Oh, you needn't protest," Nigel heard her say; "I am assured that nobody can behold this remarkable young woman without adoring her; so there's nothing to blush about."

"I'm *not* blushing!" cried Cuthbert indignantly—an assertion which provoked loud laughter and pointed fingers from the two young men, one of whom, in the scrimmage which ensued, was deposited upon his back with his wicker chair on the top of him.

Ordinarily Mr. Scarth would have rebuked such horse-play in stern language; as it was, he only frowned and walked out of the tent, passing his arm through Mr. Trenchard's and drawing him away with him. Mrs. Scarth said:

"Dear boys, please respect the tea-table. Fight it out on the lawn, if you like, and leave me to give Nigel the scolding he deserves for never coming to see us."

Nigel did not mind being left with his aunt, who never scolded anybody and for whom he had conceived the sort of affection which lonely men are apt to feel for those who will chat confidentially with them. The presence of his cousins and the spectacle of Cuthbert's rather boisterous intimacy with them deepened his sense of personal loneliness. For himself, he could not be a boy, nor could he behave like one; looking back, he doubted whether he had ever been really a boy, and remembered how he had envied the animal spirits of undergraduates, which it had been out of his power to share or comprehend. Their follies, their temptations, their vices—yes; but never their childish joy in existence. "Oh, I'm a recreant monk!" he said to himself,

with an access of the abrupt despondency to which he was subject; "there's no place for me in the outer world."

Mrs. Scarth in an unending flow of kindly prattle, was expatiating upon the importance and amenities of the worldly position which he occupied, urging him to entertain his neighbours, pointing out the capabilities of the Rixmouth garden and recommending him to adopt a hobby. "Such as Jerseys, for instance, which cost money, no doubt, but not more than you can afford and not nearly as much as thoroughbreds. What would have become of Robert if he hadn't, most fortunately, formed a passion for pigs I can't imagine! Yet, with his magisterial work and the County Council and quarrelsome public meetings and so forth, Robert is what you might call a busy man."

Nigel listened to her with one ear, while with the other he caught occasional fragments of dialogue from the young folks, who were not far off. Bessie, it appeared, was still harping upon the charms of Cuthbert's Parisian siren, and Cuthbert, to judge by the sound of his voice, was beginning to be just the least bit out of temper and patience.

"Oh, all right!" he audibly exclaimed; "let it be admitted that I am dying to throw myself at her feet. Unfortunately, there isn't much likelihood of my ever seeing either her feet or her face again."

"As if you didn't know perfectly well that you will see them both in about six weeks' time!" returned Bessie. "You forget that I have been at Lannowe and that your having made an assignation with her for August is no secret there."

Thereupon arose a Babel of tongues, terminating in a scuffle which precluded further eavesdropping; but when, a quarter of an hour later, Nigel was driving his

guest homewards in the dogcart which had brought them, he asked :

"If it isn't an impertinent question, who is Miss Dallison ?"

"Oh, only a girl whom I came across in Paris," answered Cuthbert, laughing rather shamefacedly. "A great friend of Miss Ferrand's, who appears to have been talking a lot of rot about her and me. Or else Bessie made it up to get a rise out of me."

"And is she coming to stay at Lannowe ?"

"Well, yes, I believe she is. I don't think she will interest you ; she isn't your sort."

Nigel was about to inquire what sort Miss Dallison was when Mr. Trenchard, driving a mail phaeton at a high rate of speed, came thundering by, the attendant who always accompanied him, and who presumably directed his movements, seated at his side. He raised his elbow and smiled as he passed, calling out :

"Excuse me, my dear fellow. Bad manners, I know, but I am in rather a hurry."

"Do you like old Trenchard ?" asked Cuthbert, not sorry to change the subject.

"Yes," answered Nigel ; "don't you ?"

"One feels almost bound to like a man who is so afflicted and who takes his affliction so pluckily. Otherwise I am not sure that I should care much about him."

"He has been very kind to me," said Nigel.

"Well—has he ? By your account, he has put some unpleasant jobs upon you and kept the pleasant ones for himself."

"He would be the first to admit that. In fact, he has admitted it. He confesses that he hasn't the heart to give unwelcome news in my name to tenants whom he has known all his life."

"H'm ! that was an adroit way of putting things.

Now that I come to think of it, perhaps my reason for rather disliking him is that he is so precious adroit. Upon the whole, I believe it is clumsy people who command my affections."

"At that rate," observed Nigel, with a doleful smile, "you ought to be much attached to me."

"So I am, old chap," returned the other, clapping him on the shoulder; "I hope to be able to prove it to you one of these days, if I get the chance."

The words, though honestly spoken, may not have meant very much; but to Nigel, who had seldom received such assurances and who was hungering and thirsting for a friend, they meant a great deal.

"You reconcile me to my difficult destiny!" he somewhat exaggeratedly declared.

CHAPTER IX

MONICA RECEIVES A COMPLIMENT

PROBABLY, amongst the many varieties of unhappiness to which we are all exposed, the very worst is that of being bored. On the other hand, what is generally described as dulness is not of necessity synonymous with boredom, and many men and women lead an absolutely uneventful life in complete satisfaction with themselves and their surroundings. Monica Ferrand, whose quiet, methodical little existence had hitherto been quite happy and—save for that brief London experience—singularly free from episodes, was not for one moment bored in her Yorkshire home. There was not, to be sure, very much for her to do ; but housekeeping, active charity and religious observances occupied a certain number of hours every day, while gardening and riding or driving with her father provided her with all that she asked for in the way of amusement. So, at least, she asserted when describing the above modest programme in a letter to her friend Ethel Dallison, to whom it did not occur to her to mention Nigel Scarth's frequent visits as an additional source of pleasure.

As a fact, however, those visits were becoming very frequent indeed, and Nigel (who, for his part, was often horribly bored) found a pleasure in them which Monica more or less consciously shared. It became an

understood thing that he was to lunch at Lannowe every Sunday, after hearing Mass in the chapel, and pretexts were not wanting in virtue of which he made his appearance on most days of the week, into the bargain. Monica and he grew more and more intimate, found themselves more and more in sympathy with one another and arrived finally at a species of mutual affection which, if it fell somewhat short of actual love, was perhaps no bad substitute for a passion destined, in the great majority of cases, to be shortlived. The girl, in her demure way, accepted what she perceived to be a leisurely, gentle, decorous courtship and had no wish to discourage it. Her sister had said a word or two to her before she left St. James's Square; her father, so far as she could judge, was well disposed towards Mr. Scarth; for herself, she was ready, as a matter of course, to do whatever might be deemed right by her family; and, although she was in no haste to marry, she considered that she would be extremely fortunate if a man whom she liked so much as she did Nigel Scarth were to be selected as her husband. There were, it is true, moments when she was half afraid of him, without very well knowing why, an occasional fire in his eyes, and even in his speech, which vaguely suggested volcanic possibilities; but as a rule he was subdued, kindly, a little wistful, and this latter characteristic may have helped to attract her to him; for she belonged to that class of women—a class not quite so numerous, perhaps, as it once was—whose mission in life and whose joy it is to take trouble off their husbands' shoulders. That Nigel had his share of troubles and worries she knew from his own lips, and she gathered that a good many of them might have been avoided, had his household been blessed with a mistress.

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Thus she was scarcely unprepared for what came to pass on a certain hot Sunday afternoon when he followed her out of the little chapel after Benediction, in the wake of a microscopic congregation. Lord Lannowe had ridden off to hold parley with a neighbouring magnate upon some question of local importance, there was nobody staying in the house, and it was pleasant—if, according to Monica's notions, a trifle *inconvenable*—to stroll across the lawn and sit down under the shade of a spreading cedar in the company of a young man whose conversation related at first only to religious matters. He had a great deal of fervour, while she had some; both were strongly imbued with the conviction that those who have turned their backs upon the world to seek peace in prayer and contemplation are the happiest of mortals. They talked, as they had often talked before, about that subject and regretted, as one of them almost always and the other occasionally did, that Providence did not appear to have destined them for the tranquil security of the cloister.

"Still there is no reason, after all, why one should not lead a good life anywhere," the girl said at length, in mild protest against the remarks of her companion, which had seemed to imply the contrary.

"Ah, upon conditions!" he returned. "For some people, perhaps for most people, the conditions are indispensable. Oh, not for you! You will always be good, because it is your nature to be so, and I doubt whether you could be anything else if you tried."

"And is your nature bad?" she asked, smiling.

"Yes, I think it is," he answered, with a long sigh. "I wanted to become a Benedictine because I was bad. Do you think that an odd reason? Very likely the Father Abbot thought so. I don't know what they

thought ; but they were not satisfied with me, although it seemed to me that I did nothing to cause them dissatisfaction. Then came this sudden invitation to go back to the world and take up an inheritance of which I had never dreamed. The Father Abbot would not raise a finger to restrain me. His opinion evidently was that at the bottom of my heart I wanted to go, and I cannot be sure that he was wrong. At any rate, I must confess that I have often enjoyed myself very much since I have been free. There have been worries and difficulties and misgivings, of course ; but there have also been some really good days."

"But is there any harm in that ?" asked Monica.

"Oh, there is no harm in enjoying a ride, or a game of billiards with Monsignor Nolan, or an afternoon in the garden here with you ; but my pleasures, you see, used not to be so innocent as those, and sometimes I am afraid—well, in short, I have the best reasons for distrusting myself. The truth, which I want you to know, is that I was a horrid blackguard once."

"I don't believe that," said Monica placidly.

"Ah, but I was ! And what a man has been once he may be again."

"Surely not if he has repented and sees the danger so clearly."

"I should rather say, not if the conditions of which I was speaking just now are present. I believe that a wife whom one loves and respects is the very best of all protections ; I believe that if that won't keep a man straight, nothing will. And indeed I don't think that I should be a bad husband ; though it was only right and honest to tell you that I made a poor fight against temptation in the past." He paused for a moment, and then, with a sudden smile which, to tell the truth, made him look extremely handsome and winning,

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"Monica," he asked, "will you take pity upon a poor sinner who looks to you for salvation?"

It was a somewhat original method of proposing marriage, and no doubt many girls would have considered it the reverse of flattering; but, being addressed to Monica Ferrand, it was perhaps about as effective as one as could have been chosen. To be selected as somebody's guardian angel is, after all, a compliment, and if Nigel had omitted those amatory vows which are usual on such occasions in this country, the chances are that she would have been a little bit shocked, had he indulged in them. She smiled back at him in a way which gave him the answer that he desired, but asked dubiously, with her slight French accent:

"Is it not to my father that you should go?"

She was so visibly frightened by his mode of rejoinder, which was rather more human than monastic, that he hastened to crave her pardon and assure her that he would formally approach Lord Lannowe on the morrow. Also he acquiesced in the sentence of dismissal which she felt it incumbent upon her to pronounce.

"We cannot be engaged, you know," she reminded him, "until we have permission."

"I suppose not," he agreed; "but—you do love me, Monica?"

She was not at all sure that it was permitted to say so; however, she gave herself and him the benefit of the doubt that was in her mind.

"Oh, yes," she shyly replied; "only I would rather you went away now, please."

So presently he departed, and Monica, left to herself, hoped that her indulgent father would raise no difficulties. He was very unlikely to do so, she thought, considering how hospitable he had been to Mr. Scarth and that he

must have foreseen the probable consequences of his hospitality.

Oddly enough, Lord Lannowe had not foreseen them in the least. The Duchess of Leith, acting upon Colonel Gervase's advice, had refrained from nudging him, and it was not in his easy-going, optimistic character to anticipate vexatious occurrences. When, therefore, he returned home in the evening, his daughter's timid, smiling announcement simply knocked all the breath out of his body. Such, at least, was the description that he gave of its effect upon him.

"But—but this is serious, you know!" he proceeded to gasp out; "this is a thing which concerns your whole future life! Do you mean to tell me that that solemn youth—I don't blame him for being solemn, mind you, still solemn he is, and one hardly expects such—such precipitate steps from him—do you mean to tell me that he has fallen in love with you?"

"He says so," answered Monica, colouring and looking a good deal alarmed.

"Well, well! one ought not to be astonished, I suppose, although one is astonished. But that point, after all, is of secondary importance. Am I really to understand that you have lost your heart to him, Monnie?"

Poor Monica's colour deepened to an extent which ceased to be becoming and the tears rose into her eyes. Properly brought-up and right-thinking young women do not, of course, lose their hearts before they are married; or, at any rate, should they have the misfortune to do so, they keep their discreditable secret to themselves.

"I did tell him that he ought to go to you," she faltered, leaving the question unanswered.

"Oh, he'll come to me, no doubt," returned Lord

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Lannowe, with a laugh, followed by a groan. And then, pulling his short, white beard, "You see, my child, the trouble is that young Scarth is not—well, that there are palpable objections to him. I think also that there are objections to your fate being decided at your very early age. Why are you in such a desperate hurry to leave me?"

Monica was not at all in a hurry to leave her father and her home. This she declared with an emphasis which bore every impress of sincerity, dutifully adding that if there were objections to Mr. Scarth, she would think no more about him. On being further pressed, however, she owned that she would rather marry Nigel than anybody whom she had yet seen.

"But perhaps, if you were to wait a little longer, you might see somebody else," her father suggested.

She shook her head. "I saw many men in London, and I did not like any of them, except Colonel Gervase."

"H'm! I wonder what Frances and Georgie would say to this!" murmured Lord Lannowe, thinking aloud.

"I am sure Frances would approve," said the girl eagerly; "she almost told me that she would."

"She did, eh? Then I strongly suspect that she must have neglected to inform herself of all the circumstances. Don't look so penitent, Monnie; you haven't done anything wrong, and I should forgive you if you had; I have made one or two mistakes myself in the course of my career. Still, I mustn't make the mistake of acting hurriedly in this case. I'll talk it over with Nolan and hear what he has to say. For the present, my dear, you must leave the matter in my hands, and try not to be disappointed, whatever the final decision may be."

If Monica was both disappointed and surprised, she did not look so. Her first duty, she conceived, was to

her father, and it would never have occurred to her to rebel against any pronouncement of his. Perhaps, too, she counted a little upon the support of Monsignor Nolan, who indeed, when consulted, after dinner that evening, by Lord Lannowe, gave it as his opinion that Miss Ferrand might easily do worse.

"The young fellow is a very good young fellow," he remarked, "and will be a great deal better when once he is married. Marriage, in fact, is what he wants to steady him. Not that I'm saying anything against his moral character ; but——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Lord Lannowe impatiently ; "I daresay it would do him a lot of good to be married. Still, I don't know that I am bound to study his soul's welfare to the extent of sacrificing my daughter to him. What security have I against his dying young ? And even if he lives to be old, what sort of provision will he be able to make for his widow and a dozen children ?"

Monsignor Nolan had thought of that, it seemed, and was in possession of facts and figures which he stated. Nigel Scarth would be able to make what might be called very handsome settlements, and the circumstances were, of course, such as to justify a demand for settlements unusually handsome. For the rest, although his widow probably would not be a very rich woman, there was no reason to apprehend that she would be a poor one.

"I don't see where the deuce the settlements are to come from," said Lord Lannowe.

"I'd be sorry to swear that old Tom meant them to come out of a big lump of money that he left on deposit at the bank ; but there the money is, and our young friend pockets it under the will. So I'm informed."

Lord Lannowe observed that that would have to be verified. "Assuming that your information is correct, it

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removes an obstacle, no doubt ; others remain, though. Monica is a mere child, you know."

"She is," Monsignor Nolan agreed, taking snuff ; "but don't you think children know what they wish quite as clearly as their elders?"

"Oh, at a given moment, yes. But they don't know what they will wish a twelvemonth later."

"Nor do grown-up people ; every marriage is a leap in the dark. All the same, I see no reason why you shouldn't tell her that, since she is so young, she must wait another year. That would be a measure of precaution against which neither of them could fairly rebel, and—it would be a sort of protection for them both."

Lord Lannowe jumped at the suggestion. "I think I'll do that," said he. "Provided that it is all right about the money, I believe that would be the best thing to do. But why do you say that it would be a protection for them?"

"Well," answered the other, after taking a second pinch of snuff, "you'll be having the Duchess and Lady Bracebridge here during the summer, I take it, and they'll be provided with candidates of their own as likely as not. Miss Monica is so biddable that there's no saying what she wouldn't consent to if she were bothered, and a provisional engagement would make her feel firmer on her feet. Then as to young Scarth—but you aren't interested in young Scarth."

"It looks as if I had got to be interested in him—confound him!"

"Maybe you'll understand, then, what I was going to say a while ago—that, although he's a decent lad, he has an impulsive, excitable temperament which exposes him to various temptations. I'd like to see him married to-morrow ; but, as that can't be, an engagement is the next best thing."

"What do you mean by temptations?" asked Lord Lannowe suspiciously. "If you are keeping anything back from me, it isn't fair."

"I'm keeping nothing back, my lord," answered Monsignor Nolan, laughing; "but I'm a priest and an old priest, and if I didn't know a little about human nature by this time I'd be an old fool into the bargain. Don't be afraid for your daughter, or for your future son-in-law either; I only wanted to give you all the good excuses I could think of for making two lovers happy."

Lord Lannowe was not sure that love-marriages always turned out happily; whereas his own family furnished instances which seemed to show that a marriage with which love has nothing to do may prove a quite satisfactory success. At the bottom of his heart, however, he had always felt some shame and compunction with regard to the alliances which his wife had arranged, and he certainly did not wish his little Monnie to follow in her sisters' footsteps. If, then, she had really become enamoured of this black-browed youth, she must have her way, he supposed; only he was a little annoyed with the black-browed youth for hastening a day which had seemed to be comfortably remote, as well as with himself for having failed to detect what had been apparent to Monsignor Nolan.

Nigel, therefore, was received with a good deal less geniality than he had anticipated the next morning. Lord Lannowe was too kind-hearted to be downright rude; but he went rather near being so when he said:

"The fact is, Scarth, that you are no catch. I am sure my married daughters would tell you so—or rather I am sure they will tell me so. Then again, Monica is really much too young to know her own mind yet. You

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must not ask me to sanction a formal engagement; I can't entertain that idea at present."

Nigel, somewhat taken aback, and also, it may be, rendered more eager by a rebuff which he had not expected, snatched at the words "formal" and "at present"—as indeed he had been intended to do. The year's delay for which Lord Lannowe proceeded to stipulate was accepted by him without a murmur, and he confessed—perhaps with rather more sincerity than is usually implied in such conventional acknowledgments—that he was altogether unworthy of the good fortune for which he hoped. A short parley respecting settlements followed, and then Lord Lannowe, restored to good humour by the young man's modesty and amenability, said:

"Well, there it is, then. If you are both of the same mind a year hence, we'll see. Meanwhile, you are, of course, both of you free."

Nigel again said what was conventional with regard to Miss Ferrand's entire liberty and his own obligatory allegiance, and again, no doubt, he meant what he said. But perhaps, being human, he was just a trifle disappointed when it subsequently appeared that Monica was not only resigned to delay, but welcomed it.

"Oh, but that will be perfect!" she exclaimed delightedly. "Then I shall not have to leave home for a long time. And—and I suppose you will be allowed to come here as often as you like?"

"I don't quite see how that is to be prevented, my dear," said her father, in whose presence this little speech was made, and in whose ears it rang very pleasantly.

He walked off, laughing and rubbing his hands, pluming himself upon having acted very sensibly and quite unconscious of having placed his daughter in a thoroughly false position.

CHAPTER X
AN INVASION FROM FRANCE

MAJOR DALLISON, holding up a white umbrella to protect his swimming head from the rays of the August sun, walked somewhat unsteadily across the sands towards the spot where his wife and his daughter had taken up their position and dropped heavily into a wicker chair beside them. He had lingered over his midday meal, which had been followed by numerous *petits verres*, and was consequently both courageous enough and cross enough to growl out :

"I don't know why the devil you dragged me to this accursed hole ! There's nothing for a man to do here, except stare across the Channel and wish to the Lord he was on the other side of it, and it seems to me that you yourselves haven't a soul to speak to in the place."

"I am sure it isn't because I like Boulogne that I am here," returned Mrs. Dallison, in her usual querulous tone of voice ; "I would very much rather be at Homburg, where the Whartons are, if——"

"If it were possible to live at Homburg upon seven francs a day per head, wine included," put in Miss Dallison serenely.

"Wine included !" groaned her father, with a touch of real eloquence and suffering in his thick utterance ; "if you call that stuff wine, there's nothing you wouldn't say ! It wasn't a question of expense either, as you

very well know. Haven't I had to pay a deuced sight more than Homburg would have cost to rig you out for this Yorkshire visit of yours, which isn't going to bring you in a farthing that I can see?"

The young lady made no reply. She might have asserted that the sum disbursed upon her unavoidable outfit had scarcely exceeded the price of three railway-fares from Paris to Homburg, and it would have been easy to adduce figures in support of the statement; but she held her peace, being conscious that her parents had, after all, reasonable excuse for displeasure and disappointment. To refuse Sol Wharton, who, notwithstanding the unconcealed displeasure and disappointment of his surviving parent, had magnificently cast himself and his dollars at Ethel's feet—what could be said of such insensate perversity, save that it involved its own deserved punishment? Major and Mrs. Dallison had said that and a good deal more, meeting only with tolerant smiles in rejoinder from one who was sorry for them but not in the least afraid of them. Secretly, they both hoped that Mr. Wharton was not the man to take No for an answer, and indeed their daughter was of the same opinion. Nevertheless, she had not dismissed the amorous Sol for the sake of tantalising and thus making more sure of him, nor, if he had pursued her to Boulogne, would he have been rewarded by a word of encouragement from her. She realised with exactitude what he was worth; sure of her power over him, she held him still in reserve; only she had set her heart upon paying that promised visit to Lannowe, and when once Ethel Dallison had set her heart upon a thing she seldom failed to secure it.

"Waste of time and money!" murmured Mrs. Dallison despondently. "It isn't even as if you were likely to enjoy yourself, Ethel. I know what people of that

sort are, if you don't. They will think you ought to feel highly honoured at having been invited to their house ; they won't trouble themselves to amuse you, they won't introduce you to their friends, and if their friends notice you at all, it will only be with the object of making you uncomfortable. Englishwomen nowadays are allowed to be anything—all sorts of things—except poor and unknown."

"Oh, I expect I shall enjoy myself," answered Ethel, with a low, anticipatory laugh, while she surveyed the tumbling green sea, which had no terrors for her, and which she was to cross that night.

Mrs. Dallison shot an anxious, suspicious side-glance at her daughter. Ethel was so shrewd in some respects, so rash and unaccountable in others, so self-willed always ! Why throw away time and money when the supply of both is obviously limited ? She was about to venture upon a query which would have been neither prudent nor productive of information when the aggrieved Major struck in :

"Oh, you'll enjoy yourself fast enough ; nobody doubts that ! The question is what sort of enjoyment is going to be provided for *me* in a foul, stuffy *pension* where there are ten old women to every man and not a solitary gentleman except myself."

He said "m'shelf," his hands were thrust deep into the pockets of his trousers, his shabby hat was tilted over his red nose and he certainly did not look very much like the exception that he claimed to be. Ethel turned her eyes towards him for a moment. The profound contempt which she felt for the man was sometimes tempered by a touch of pity ; but that was only when he was either sober or hopelessly drunk. When in a semi-tipsy, tentatively bullying condition, he had to be repressed ; so she proceeded to repress him.

"There are plenty of *cabarets* in Boulogne," she curtly remarked.

Major Dallison jumped up at once and slouched off, scowling and muttering to himself. Perhaps, amongst other odd survivals in the character of one who had once been a smart and not unpopular officer, there may have lurked some remnants of self-respect. At any rate, he could never endure an allusion to his infirmity, nor when such an allusion came from his daughter's lips had he the pluck to rebuke it. It was left for Mrs. Dallison to say plaintively:

"I wonder you are not ashamed to speak to your father like that, Ethel!"

"I *am* ashamed," answered the girl.

"But you do it, all the same."

"Oh, yes, I do it all the same. Perhaps he is a little ashamed of degrading himself and us; but he goes on doing it, all the same. One is always feeling ashamed of conduct which one doesn't propose to abandon, don't you think so?"

"I am sure I have always tried to do my duty," whined Mrs. Dallison hopelessly.

She did not think that Ethel ever tried to do hers, and she would have liked to say so, but was daunted by the girl's cool smile and slightly raised eyebrows. What use was there in upbraiding Ethel, who had always been, and doubtless always would be, supremely selfish? To throw away an income of many millions of dollars did not sound like selfishness; yet it must have been, otherwise Ethel would never have done it. The only hope was that a similar motive would preserve her from throwing herself away upon young Gretton, for whose sake Mrs. Dallison more than suspected that this journey to Yorkshire was being undertaken.

Ethel could have told her that both the surmise and

the hope were fairly well grounded. Miss Dallison was what her parentage and the force of difficult, humiliating circumstances had almost inevitably made her; she knew, of course, that she was beautiful; she knew that her face was her fortune, and she was not in the least inclined to bestow her fortune upon a man who had no pecuniary equivalent to offer. Yet it remained to be discovered whether Cuthbert Gretton was a pauper or not, while it was a fact which she had frankly admitted to herself that he had pleased her more than any admirer who had as yet crossed her path. So she crossed to Dover, that night, upon heaving billows beneath the full moon, with meditations sufficiently absorbing to divert her attention from the unpleasant spectacle of seasick fellow-passengers. At the worst, Lannowe would be pretty sure to give her opportunities during the grouse-shooting season; she knew quite as much about the people whom she was likely to meet as did her mother, whose warning with regard to the criminality of being poor and obscure she recalled with some amusement. The women, no doubt, would snub her, but not the men; she did not mean to be ignored and would certainly not be ignored, nor did she incur much risk of disappointment. Time and money were not going to be wasted; although a romantic dream might possibly have to be relinquished. From all of which it will be perceived that it behoved Mr. Cuthbert Gretton to mind what he was about, unless he was prepared to compromise his future with the burden of a tipsy and impecunious father-in-law.

For a young lady of prepossessing appearance to travel all the way from Boulogne to Yorkshire without so much as the protection of a maid is perhaps rather a bold proceeding even in these days; still, if you can't afford a maid, what are you to do? This was the

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pertinent query addressed by Miss Dallison to her friend Monica on the following afternoon, in reply to the latter's ejaculations of mingled dismay and admiration.

"At the same time," she added, "you needn't mention my forlorn condition to the other people in the house. I suppose there *are* other people in the house?"

"Oh, yes, a great many," answered Monica, who had met her visitor in the hall and had conducted her straight upstairs to her bedroom. "Two of my sisters are here, with their husbands, and a number of their friends have been asked to meet them. Not by me, of course, for I know hardly anybody; but Frances and Georgie sent us a list some time ago."

"I see. That was very thoughtful of them," remarked Ethel, smiling.

"Yes; it saved father and me a good deal of trouble. We have also one or two friends from the neighbourhood coming to dinner this evening."

Although the blush which accompanied the above announcement did not escape Ethel's notice, she refrained from commenting upon it. That her little friend would ere long be bestowed in marriage upon somebody from the neighbourhood was highly probable and a matter of merely relative importance; so all she said was:

"That young man whom I met in Paris—wasn't his name Gretton?—doesn't happen to be one of them by any chance, does he?"

Monica consulted some ivory tablets which hung at her waist and found that Mr. Gretton's name was not included amongst the invited guests.

"But he is staying with his uncle at Knaresby," she added, "and I think very likely we shall see him tomorrow, if you care to come out and look on at the shooting. Mr. Nigel Scarth, who is a sort of cousin of his, is dining with us tonight."

She was rather in hopes of being interrogated with reference to Mr. Nigel Scarth ; but she was too shy to take the initiative, and Ethel asked no questions. The latter, indeed, seemed somewhat preoccupied, acknowledged to being tired after her journey and presently begged to be allowed a bath and a rest until the dinner hour.

In justice to Major Dallison it must be said that he was not stingy with his money when he had any to spare ; but then he very seldom had any to spare, and the amount which his daughter had been able to get out of him for the defrayal of necessary expenses could scarcely have sufficed to pay for the handsome and well-cut dinner gown in which, with the help of Monica's maid, she arrayed herself shortly before eight o'clock. Simple though it was in design and accessories, Lady Bracebridge subsequently appraised its value—or rather its price—at seventy guineas. It had not cost that, nor anything like that ; still white satin is an expensive material and Miss Dallison's facilities for obtaining goods on credit were limited. She had plunged rather heavily into debt before leaving France because she had deemed it worth while to do so. It was never her way to be rash ; yet she was well aware that few victories are to be won without some timely audacity.

If one of the minor victories which she had had in her mind's eye was the creating of a small sensation amongst Lord Lannowe's numerous guests, she gained it, so to speak, without firing a shot the moment that she sailed, serenely self-possessed into their presence. Everybody wondered who she was ; almost everybody asked, and not a few were told by Lord Lannowe, who hastened to welcome Monica's beautiful friend and introduce her to his elder daughters. These ladies shook hands with her, smiled upon her and were visibly

impressed by her personality : it was an initial success which, although anticipated, afforded her considerable satisfaction. Somewhat less satisfactory was it to find that the partner allotted to her was an old gentleman, wearing dark-coloured spectacles, whose opening remark was :

"I have a double apology to offer you, Miss Dallison. Firstly, I am well stricken in years, as you see ; secondly, instead of leading you into the diningroom, I must ask you to lead me, for I am stone-blind. But you must blame the stupid, inexorable laws of precedence, not me. It isn't my fault that all these youngsters are sprigs of nobility."

Now, a lady whose face is her fortune is placed at an obvious disadvantage in dealing with the blind, while old men, even when they retain the use of all their senses, are much more often bores than not ; but Ethel accepted her destiny with an amiability of which Mr. Trenchard's abnormally keen ears at once made him aware, and in the sequel he proved himself both an entertaining and an instructive neighbour. He told her who all her fellow-guests were and had nothing ill-natured to say about any of them ; by a sort of miraculous instinct he seemed to know exactly where they were seated ; he even knew (for he said so) that the recipient of his information was attracting universal attention.

"I should be disposed to give Parisian dressmakers some credit for that," he observed, smiling, "if I were not conscious of another and a better reason. Well, we must all expect to pay in some shape or form for our blessings and advantages, when we have any. I hope you don't mind being stared at, Miss Dallison."

Miss Dallison did not in the least mind a species of tribute to which she was inured, nor did she mind being enlightened as to the tastes, habits and so forth of the

Duchess of Leith and others, which Mr. Trenchard depicted for her with deft, illuminating touches, free alike from malice and from flattery. He was certainly a very clever old man, and his remarks could hardly fail to be of service to her in her future relations with all these strangers. He did not, however, until questioned, make any allusion to the one who happened to interest her more than the rest, both by reason of the fact that he was placed on Monica's right hand and because of the unmistakable interest with which she herself was regarded by him. This young man, with the big, wild brown eyes, which were hastily averted as often as she returned his gaze, but which were fixed upon her once more immediately afterwards, must, she presumed, be a personage of high rank to be sitting where he was ; but Mr. Trenchard, to whom she hazarded the above suggestion, laughed and replied :

"Oh, no ; that is my friend and neighbour Nigel Scarth of Rixmouth Castle, of whom you have heard, no doubt. Precedence is dispensed with in his case, of course."

"Why of course ? " Miss Dallison inquired.

"I took it for granted that you had been told of his engagement to Miss Ferrand. There has been no formal announcement, it is true, as Lord Lannowe—very sensibly, in my humble opinion—wishes the young people to wait a year and make sure that they know their own minds ; but it is *le secret de Polichinelle*. The Duchess and Lady Bracebridge favour the match, I hear, though I hardly understand why they should ; for it cannot be called a good one from their point of view."

"He is not rich, then ? "

"Well, he is and he isn't. While he lives he will have a large and probably an increasing income ; but the estates must pass away from his children when he

dies, if they should be Roman Catholics like himself—as they naturally will be in the event of his marrying Miss Ferrand.”

“What a queer condition of things!”

Mr. Trenchard agreed that it was rather queer, but observed that the last will and testament of poor old Tom Scarth, who had been queer all his life, was pretty sure to be that.

“Whether he expected his nephew to accept the conditions that he laid down or not I can’t tell; assuredly he did not mean his property to remain permanently in Roman Catholic hands, though. It is just possible that he may have wished to tempt Nigel into making certain of the succession by contracting a Protestant marriage.”

“But does not the Church of Rome stipulate that the children of mixed marriages must be brought up as Catholics?” Miss Dallison asked.

“Perhaps; only I know of no means by which such a stipulation could be enforced. My experience leads me to believe that three men out of every four end by doing what their wives want them to do, and, although my friend Nigel is a bit of a fanatic, I doubt whether he has a very strong will. Still I grant you that the hypothesis of his uncle, who was scarcely acquainted with him, having discovered that is a little far-fetched.”

Ethel glanced once more across the table at the man of alleged weak will, whose countenance did not at that moment convey the impression that he merited Mr. Trenchard’s criticism. Instead of avoiding her scrutiny, as before, he met it this time with dilated, almost fierce eyes; his brows had contracted themselves into a frown, his lower jaw was slightly thrust forward, he had much more the air of defying her than of paying homage to her physical charms. He had probably guessed, she thought, that he was under discussion, and

she promptly turned to her neighbour with a change of subject.

"I have never seen grouse-driving," said she. "Is it permitted to look on at the sport from a distance, or would one be considered a nuisance if one did?"

Mr. Trenchard assured her that there would be no difficulty about her witnessing what was likely to be a very pretty exhibition of skill on the morrow. He himself had been a fine shot up to the fatal day which had put an end to his shooting, as well as to Robert Scarth's for ever, and he could discourse upon sport—as indeed he could upon most topics—with knowledge and ease. It was not until dinner was nearly over that Ethel inquired abruptly:

"Did Monica fall in love with him, or was it he who fell in love with her?"

"My dear young lady," returned the old man, laughing, "how can I tell? I am not omniscient. Perhaps there was no falling in love at all."

"Ah!—is that why you dislike the engagement?"

"Surely I had not the indiscretion to say that I disliked it, had I? Well, since you ask me, I will be indiscreet enough to confess that I don't think it a promising one and that I believe it might be broken off without breaking of hearts on either side. But this is quite between ourselves, please. I don't wish to be a busybody or a marplot, and I am in constant danger of offending in that direction. You can understand, I dare say, that a man who has so little personal interest in the present or the future is often tempted to interfere more than he ought with other people's business."

In leaving the room, Ethel had to pause for a moment at the spot where Nigel Scarth stood, and the passage of a stout lady, which caused her to step aside, brought her so close to him that a stray lock of her hair

actually brushed his cheek. He sprang back, with almost ludicrous alacrity, and exclaimed "I beg your pardon!" in a voice which sounded anything but apologetic. She turned her beautiful face towards him, surveying him with a surprise which may very probably have been genuine; then she broke into a low laugh, bowed and moved on.

"Evidently it would not be difficult, if it were worth while," she thought to herself; "but the first thing is to find out what poor little Monica's views are."

Poor little Monica had no views: probably there was a vague impression in her mind that it is scarcely proper or becoming for a young girl to entertain such things. This, at any rate, was the conclusion to which her friend and former schoolfellow came after a long talk with her in the huge bedroom which had been appropriated to the use of the mistress of the house. Monica appeared as comically lost and out of place in that vast apartment as she had done in the long drawingroom after dinner, when the Duchess of Leith had unhesitatingly usurped the position of hostess, and when Ethel had been made the recipient of many compliments, expressed and implied. Ethel could not but be conscious that she was physically and mentally adapted to fill large places, whereas Monica made no secret of the fact that what she yearned for was obscurity. Such are the practical jokes which Fate delights to play upon helpless mortals.

"Fortunately," remarked the younger of the two, "Nigel dislikes crowds as much as I do, and he says he will never wish to fill his house. I am very glad of that; for Rixmouth Castle could accommodate nearly twice the number of people that we can."

She had already related her love-tale, if such it could be called, and had answered certain pertinent queries

after a fashion more enlightening perhaps than she was aware.

"What courage you have!" Ethel exclaimed. And, in response to surprised, but mute, interrogation, she went on: "Yes, it requires some courage to accept a part which you don't much fancy in anticipation and will fancy still less in reality. Big houses are not built to stand empty; you will have to entertain, whether you like it or not, and from what you tell me, there won't be too much money to spend upon entertainment. Of course that would be only a trifle if you really cared for this Mr. Scarth——"

"But I do care for him!" Monica protestingly interrupted.

"Oh, yes—and you care for your father and for your sisters, and even a little for your humble servant. But suppose some fine day you were to discover that there was another person for whom you cared just ten thousand times more than for all the rest of us put together, including Mr. Scarth?"

"That could not possibly happen!" cried Monica, flushing.

"Well, such things have been known to happen."

"Only to people who have no religion," Monica declared. "At all events," she added, noticing her friend's incredulous smile and remembering allusions made in her hearing to cases which did not altogether bear out that theory, "I am sure nothing of the kind will happen to me or to Nigel. You don't know how good he is!"

"He may be as good as he looks, or even better than he looks," returned her friend; "I hope he is. But if he had all the virtues of all the saints it wouldn't necessarily follow that he was the right man for you."

"You mean that I am not good enough for him!" cried Monica apprehensively.

"No; that isn't what I mean. Perhaps, after all, it doesn't very much matter what I mean. And you aren't married to him yet, and you have a whole year of liberty before you. Now I am too sleepy to say anything more, except goodnight."

CHAPTER XI

SOME SKILFUL SHOTS

COLONEL GERVASE, who was one of the large house-party assembled at Lannowe, did not go out with the guns on the following day. Although a very fair shot, he had no pretension to stand in the same category with Lord Bracebridge (whose record of over seven hundred grouse to his own gun in twelve hours of unremitting labour, seemed likely to secure for him a species of immortality) nor even with half a dozen others amongst Lord Lannowe's guests ; so that he hardly felt justified in endangering the reputation of Mr. Nigel Scarth's celebrated moor, whither the sportsmen were bound. He had, besides, a certain unacknowledged, half-conscious reluctance to accept Mr. Nigel Scarth's hospitality ; for he had not taken a fancy to that young man. For the rest, he was by no means the sole representative of his sex at the luncheon hour, being kept in countenance not only by such veterans as the Duke of Leith and Lord Lannowe himself but by sundry younger men who either preferred the society of the ladies to hard work under a broiling sun or distrusted their skill sufficiently to shelter themselves behind that excuse.

"It is Gospel truth that I didn't want to shoot today," Gervase assured Monica, when anxiously interrogated by her upon the subject ; "I don't like disgracing

myself, and in these times a man is considered to disgrace himself if he misses half the number of birds that I should have missed. Moreover, I should have been sorry to disappoint my host; for I suppose I couldn't have done that without disappointing you also, could I?"

He had already disappointed her a good deal by the very lukewarm congratulations which he had addressed to her upon her betrothal, as well as by his curt confession that he did not much care about her fair friend Miss Dallison.

"I wish," she sighed, a little reproachfully, "you wouldn't talk about him in that way!"

"In what way?" Gervase inquired. "Have I spoken any evil of him?"

"No; only I can see that you don't like him, and I am afraid Ethel doesn't like him either, and you don't like Ethel. It is all so unfortunate!"

Gervase laughed, but did not dispute the truth of her assertions.

"It would not be fair," he remarked presently, "still perhaps it would not be altogether unnatural on my part if I were the least bit in the world prejudiced against your *fiancé*. I remember, though no doubt you have forgotten, a certain promise that you made to me in Paris."

"I have never forgotten it," the girl declared, colouring up; "but I thought you were speaking then of some marriage which my sisters might arrange for me."

"It is true enough that I was," Gervase answered; "whereas you entered into this engagement of your own free will. Yes, I must admit that that makes all the difference, and that consulting me would hardly have saved you—deterred you, I mean—from making it."

"I think perhaps it would," said Monica, with a

distressed look. "That is, if you had had any good reasons to give me. I am afraid," she went on, after a moment, "you have the same idea as Ethel seems to have—that I do not care enough for Nigel."

Colonel Gervase's idea, which was the result of somewhat limited opportunities for observation, was that Nigel did not care enough for her ; but he was not so ill-advised as to give utterance to it, and the above conversation, which had taken place on the terrace after luncheon, was broken off at this point by the Duchess, who stepped out through one of the open windows to say :

"I have ordered the waggonette, Monica, for you and for those who want to go and look at the shooters. All the old women are writing letters ; so they may be left to take care of themselves. Ned, you can drive me in the pony-chaise, if you like."

It was certain that he would have to do so, whether he liked it or not. It is not equally certain that the party which was subsequently conveyed to the neighbourhood of Rixmouth in the waggonette, and thence proceeded on foot over a couple of miles of heathery moorland, liked the form of amusement provided for them ; for to the majority of the ladies grouse-driving was no novelty, while there are more enjoyable experiences even to the most modest of men than admiring the prowess of their fellows. Monica and Ethel were exceptions. The former, knowing how nervously eager Nigel was to maintain the high renown of the moor to which he had succeeded, wanted very much to hear an account of the day's sport, while the latter wanted several things, of which the chance of beholding first-class marksmanship was only one. As a matter of fact, she did not see much shooting, for the ladies arrived upon the scene so late that they came in for no more than the

last two drives of the afternoon ; still, since it was her privilege on both occasions to be stationed behind Lord Bracebridge, who did not miss a single bird that came within his range, she may be said to have witnessed the cream of the exhibition.

"Yes, it will be a very good bag, I believe," Nigel said, in answer to Monica's question. "Of course it might easily be increased if we were to go on another hour or so ; but the keeper tells me it was one of my uncle's rules never to have more than sixteen drives in one day, and I am so ignorant upon the whole subject that I think my safest plan is to keep strictly to precedent."

He himself had taken no share in the sport. He was not anything like enough of an adept to do so in such company, he told Miss Dallison, when she pointed to the walking-stick in his hand and inquired what he had done with his gun.

"So you stand modestly aside even on your own land!" she exclaimed. "Isn't that rather Quixotic of you?"

He answered, "Oh, no ; it is quite customary."

He did not seem at all desirous of entering into conversation with Miss Dallison. He avoided looking at her and kept close to the elbow of his betrothed, who was just then talking to Lord Bracebridge, a big, brown-bearded man with a loud voice. Lord Bracebridge was very well pleased with himself and was consequently in a good humour with all the world, including his little sister-in-law. Unlike the majority of famous shots, who are wont to be taciturn, he loved to expatiate upon the details of his recent feats, and in Monica he found an excellent, if not a remarkably intelligent, listener. She turned and walked down the hillside with him, while the remaining sportsmen, quitting

their respective shelters, approached the spot where Nigel and Ethel were left standing. Among these was a stalwart figure which the latter at once recognised. Nevertheless, she inquired of her neighbour who the tall young man in the dark-coloured clothes was.

"I thought you knew Cuthbert Gretton," he answered, with a quick, half-suspicious side-glance at her. "You met him in Paris last spring, didn't you?"

"Oh, Mr. Gretton, of course! Yes, he is a friend of some friends of ours there. I suppose he either shoots better than you do or is less unselfish than you are. Which is it?"

"I believe he shoots better than anybody here, except Lord Bracebridge. It is not unselfishness that prevents me from trying to do what I have not learnt to do yet; it is only fear of making the bag much smaller than it ought to be. I do not claim to be an unselfish person."

"Unselfish persons never do make that claim," observed Ethel pensively.

"You can't know what I am," was Nigel's ungracious rejoinder.

It was very unlike him to adopt such a tone, for he was, as a rule, scrupulously courteous in his relations with ladies; but Miss Dallison did not take offence. She smiled and returned quietly:

"Perhaps I may be permitted to guess, though. After all, I have eyes in my head."

She had indeed, and what was more, she had eyes which, when they chose, could insist upon being met. Nigel's encountered them now with evident and not unflattering reluctance. He said:

"If you have formed anything approaching to an accurate guess, you must be aware that I don't deserve further study."

"Oh, no," she answered, laughing, "I have only got the length of discovering that you don't desire it."

She would perhaps have had some additional discoveries and surmises to announce if Cuthbert Gretton had not at that moment stepped forward, cap in hand, to renew acquaintance with her. Cuthbert, conscious of the observation of several bystanders, including that of his cousin Bessie Scarth, was rather shy, but determined to give nobody an excuse for calling him so. Miss Dallison and he had been very good friends in Paris; he was not going to avoid her now out of a silly and ignoble fear of being chaffed. So he greeted her cordially, and was received, if not with corresponding cordiality, yet in a manner which implied that the young lady was glad to see him again.

"You have been distinguishing yourself, I hear," said she. "Second only to Lord Bracebridge, which means, I suppose, superior by a long way to everybody else."

"Oh, I'm only a moderate shot at the best of times," he answered, "and I haven't done well today. I don't know who can have given you such a misleading report of me."

She turned round to demand support from her informant; but Nigel had already made himself scarce. He could be seen striding downhill at a great pace across the heather, and Ethel accepted his desertion of her with an amused laugh.

"Wouldn't one think that he was devoted, heart and soul, to Monica?" was her comment upon his precipitate retirement.

"Well, I presume he is," said Cuthbert. "They are practically engaged to be married, you know."

"Yes; but the one thing doesn't always involve the other, does it? However, let us hope for Monica's sake

and for his own, that your friend is what he appears to be."

"He is everything that he ought to be," Cuthbert boldly declared.

"That is comprehensive and uncompromising, at all events! You and he seem to be very staunch friends to one another. It is true that he didn't give you quite such a splendid character as that; still he did say that you were the best shot here, with the exception of Lord Bracebridge."

"Well, he doesn't know a great deal about shooting yet," observed Cuthbert; "not half as much as you know about riding, though you pretended to be in need of lessons when we last met. Shall we be able to manage a gallop over the moors while you are at Lannowe, do you think?"

He was not anxious to discuss Nigel; but he was more than a little anxious to find out whether the liking for himself which Miss Dallison had as good as avowed some months back survived or not. Something undefinable in her manner led him to fear that it did not, and that she would have preferred continuing her conversation with his friend to being interrupted by him. However, she soon dispelled that painful impression. Walking beside him, she told him how glad she was to be in England, how glad not to be at Boulogne, of which place and of her sojourn there she drew a suggestive little picture in a few words—how glad also to have escaped Homburg. She did not say that she had refused Sol Wharton; but he gathered that she had, and could not help rejoicing. Furthermore, it was pleasant to be assured that she would like nothing better than a ride across the open country, should it occur to her kind host to offer her the use of a horse. Presently she asked to be introduced to his cousins,

who were tramping on ahead, and of whom she made a speedy conquest by the employment of simple methods. There is, indeed, little need of resorting to complicated ones when Heaven has blessed you with a beautiful face, a soft voice and quick intelligence. Even Bessie, who was not disposed to be prejudiced in Miss Dallison's favour, had to acknowledge afterwards that Cuthbert's evident infatuation about the girl was not surprising. She said this, with her customary frankness, to Cuthbert himself, who rather provokingly rejoined, "Oh, I'm not infatuated, I'm only appreciative."

If there be such a word as "appreciative" in the elastic English language (which seems open to doubt) it probably applied well enough to the sentiments that this clear-sighted young barrister entertained for Ethel Dallison. He thought her very charming and very clever; but he was not sure that he altogether trusted her, and his vague misgivings were confirmed when he saw her walk away from the roadside, where the carriages were waiting, with Nigel Scarth. Yet it was surely a good-natured act on her part to cede her place in the waggonette to one of the sportsmen who had twisted his ankle, and, considering that all the other men were returning to Lannowe on foot, the supposition that she wanted to attach herself to Nigel, who was not going to Lannowe at all, might have seemed a little far-fetched. Nevertheless, that was exactly what she did want, and how, without being downright churlish, was Nigel to refuse her when she requested him point-blank to accompany her part of the way?

"I am afraid," she remarked, "you live somewhere in the opposite direction, don't you? Still, as you haven't been shooting, you can't be tired, and there are various things about which I wish you to tell me, if you will."

He was somewhat surprised when he heard what these were. He expected to be questioned as to his engagement and the state of his affections; but Miss Dallison made none of the allusions which he was prepared to resent and discourage. Her interest, her curiosity and her sympathy had been aroused, it seemed, by the account that she had heard of his history.

"It is so incomprehensible to me that any man, especially any young man, should betake himself to a monastery!"

"Perhaps," said Nigel, "if you belonged to our faith, you would think it still more incomprehensible that any man should ever voluntarily leave one."

"But a lot of them do, don't they?"

"A good many are rejected, of course; I don't think many abandon the religious life by their own wish."

"As you have done. Well, that makes you doubly puzzling, doubly interesting. I wish you wouldn't mind explaining! I don't ask out of impertinent curiosity; I really do want to understand."

He was not at all inclined to believe her; her beauty, by which he was half-fascinated, half-repelled, was not, by his way of thinking, the beauty of a good woman, and he both feared and hated women who were not good. Still, since he must make some answer, he mentioned in conventional language the motives which for many centuries have actuated that minority amongst believers who have felt called upon to separate themselves from the world. Then, perceiving—or thinking he perceived—that he had not made himself intelligible, he gradually grew warmer, forgot who his hearer was, expatiated upon the joy, the peace, the safety of seclusion, and ended by declaring that the highest happiness of which humanity is capable is that generated by self-sacrifice and self-denial. His face became transfigured

while he spoke ; his eyes shone, his voice trembled, it was impossible to doubt his sincerity. But Ethel Dallison, who had been watching him curiously, did not seem to be much moved.

"Do you know," said she, "that your self-denial and self-sacrifice sound uncommonly like selfishness in a sublime form?"

"Ah, that is an old accusation," returned Nigel, dropping down from the clouds and reverting to his former dry voice ; "it is only made by those who don't understand."

"Well, I am trying to understand. Everybody, of course, wants to be happy, and, as your belief is that virtuous persons are happier than sinners, you imprison yourselves lest you should be tempted to commit sins. That may prove that you are wiser than the rest of us ; I can't see how it makes you less selfish."

"You only mention one of our reasons."

"I am pretty sure that it was *your* reason," Ethel persisted.

He jerked up his shoulders impatiently. "As you please! Anyhow, my reason for having joined the Order doesn't signify much, considering that I have left it."

"And your reason for leaving it?"

"You will probably set me down as a humbug and a hypocrite if I say that I thought my duty was to leave it ; but I did think so. I had no wish to give up the life ; I would return to it gladly tomorrow."

Ethel laughed. "Your remarks," she observed, "are edifying, but scarcely complimentary to Monica. Perhaps she also represents duty rather than temptation to you, though."

Nigel glared angrily at the beautiful, mocking countenance by his side. If Monica represented duty for

him, (but he was far from acknowledging that he regarded her in so cold a light), Miss Dallison, he thought, was no inapt symbol of temptation.

"You know no more about me than you do about religion," was his rejoinder.

"I know so little about either! And when I humbly endeavour to inform myself, I am scowled at for my pains."

"Oh, if you seriously wished for religious instruction!—— But of course you don't."

"Why should that be a matter of course? Wasn't there a time when you wished for religious instruction, and had the luck to obtain it? Isn't it possible that there are points of resemblance between my case and yours?—or at least what was once yours? I have no religion that deserves to be called by that name; it begins and ends with my going to church on Sunday mornings, and it certainly doesn't prevent my doing anything that I feel inclined to do. I feel, as I am sure you used to feel, that something more than that is needed to ward off catastrophes."

Was she speaking the truth, or was this only a subtle device to ensnare him? Nigel remained on his guard, though he felt that his guard was being broken down.

"The Catholic Church, which is the only Church, has saved me from ruin," he said; "it is certain that she will do as much for you, if you will let her and if you honestly wish to believe."

Ethel nodded. "Only there are things which it is not at all easy to believe," she remarked pensively.

"Things incomprehensible to human reason, do you mean? But Anglicans hold, or profess to hold, beliefs quite as much so as ours. You will be surprised to find how quickly all your difficulties will vanish from the moment that you make surrender and submission. Why

don't you have a talk with Monsignor Nolan, who is a well-read man and broad-minded into the bargain?"

"I think," answered the embryonic proselyte, smiling, "that a talk with you might be more convincing. I may be wrong, but I can't help fancying that we have a good deal in common, you and I."

It was precisely because he had the same impression that he was afraid of her and shrank from intimacy with her. Yet he had the zeal which characterises converts—or, as his Uncle Robert and his late Uncle Tom would have called them, perverts—and was he to allow an immortal soul to go to perdition by reason of ignoble suspicions and self-distrust? That the soul in question chanced to be enshrined in a mortal body of disquieting comeliness was surely no adequate excuse for neglect. So he ended by responding hesitatingly and rather frigidly:

"I shall be glad if I can be of any service to you, Miss Dallison—provided that you mean what you say."

She assured him that she meant what she said, she hoped that they might meet again ere long, and then, allowing herself to be overtaken by the other pedestrians, she bade him farewell.

"A fortnight or three weeks," was her mental conclusion. "I doubt whether it could be done in less, for he is very *farouche*; but probably they will ask me to stay as long."

CHAPTER XII

METHODS OF SELF-DEFENCE

HUMPHRY TRENCHARD was seated in his library one morning, dictating letters to his faithful attendant Bailey, who served him in the capacity of amanuensis as well as valet, when he was informed that Mr. Nigel Scarth would like to see him, if he was disengaged.

"I am always disengaged when Mr. Nigel wants me," was the old gentleman's smiling reply; "I shall not want you again, Bailey, until I ring."

And when, after a minute, his visitor was shown into the spacious, sunny, comfortable room which would have been the drawingroom, had the bachelor owner of Glen Cottage required such an apartment, he said cheerily :

"Well, my dear boy, what now? No more landlord's troubles, I hope? I have managed that poaching business for you, I am glad to say, and nothing further will be said or done about it. Under all the circumstances, it really would not have been wise to persist in prosecuting."

"As you know," answered Nigel, "I never wished to prosecute; I only threatened the man because you seemed to think at first that I ought."

"Quite true—quite true; it did at first look like a case which ought not to be passed over. Perhaps you

went a little further than I should have advised and said rather more than it was quite prudent to say ; but never mind ! I have smoothed him down. There is nothing else, then ? ”

“ Nothing connected with the estate, that I am aware of.”

“ Ah ! your voice tells me that there is something not connected with the estate. Come and sit down and let us hear all about it.”

Nigel seated himself beside this kindly old mentor of his, whose hand was laid affectionately upon his arm and whose sightless countenance was turned interrogatively towards him. He had learned to rely more and more upon old Humphry in his manifold perplexities ; yet he did not care at once to admit that he had come to Glen Cottage that morning with a special purpose in view. He said that he found life a somewhat complicated business, that he experienced constant difficulty in reconciling the claims of his religion and his co-religionists with his duties as a county magnate, that he could not help recognising that he was a square peg in a round hole, and so forth. These vague complaints were sympathetically received ; he was exhorted to be of good courage and was reminded that if, like the rest of the world, he had some trials to bear, he had also a very fair share of blessings for which to be thankful ; but he was not questioned, for his hearer knew that he would end by saying what he wanted to say.

“ So all the fine folks have left Lannowe, I hear,” Mr. Trenchard remarked, when a pause came in the conversation.

“ Yes, thank goodness ! ” answered Nigel ; “ there is nobody left in the house now, except Miss Dallison.” He added abruptly, “ I should like to know what you think of Miss Dallison.”

"I think her a very agreeable young lady," said old Humphry blandly.

"Oh, but I am sure you must think more than that about her; you don't stop short at discovering that people are agreeable or disagreeable. Does she, for instance, give you the impression of being sincere?"

"I am afraid there are not many women of whom it can be said that they are always sincere; I should imagine that Miss Dallison was so sometimes. But you must remember that I haven't seen much of her."

"Well, I have been seeing a good deal of her lately."

"So I understand."

Nigel stared and frowned. "Who told you that?" he rather fiercely inquired.

"My dear fellow," returned the old gentleman, laughing, "do you suppose that two people can repeatedly stroll away from their friends and companions together without exciting remark? Of course remarks have been made about you and Miss Dallison; but not ill-natured ones. Not, at least, to me."

"The reason of our having been so much together," said Nigel in a calmer tone of voice, "is that she wants to become a Catholic. No; that is putting it too strongly: she only tells me that for some reasons she would like to be a Catholic."

"And you don't know whether to believe her or not?"

"That's just it; I don't know whether to believe her or not."

"Well," said Mr. Trenchard musingly, after a pause, "if you want my opinion, I should think that you had better not believe her. But this is strictly between ourselves, if you please. Even to you, my dear Nigel, I don't at all like saying the sort of thing that I am going to say; only it is right perhaps to put you on your guard."

What was he going to say ? Nigel looked startled, apprehensive notes of interrogation at the placid old man, who seemed to be quite conscious of his changed expression and resumed soothingly :

"Oh, I haven't the least intention of scolding you ; you are in no way to blame. But perhaps I am ; for I am afraid I must plead guilty to having let my tongue run away with me on the occasion of my first introduction to Miss Dallison. She was anxious to hear all about her friend's future husband, and perhaps my answers to her questions were more full and particular than there was any need for them to be. I remember, for one thing, mentioning that it would not be in your power to bequeath your property to your son, should he be of your own creed."

"I don't see any harm in your having told her that ; it isn't a secret."

"No ; but it may have put ideas into her head. She said something about the children of mixed marriages being necessarily brought up as Roman Catholics, and I believe my reply was that there could be no legal obligation of the kind. I can't recollect exactly what passed, but, looking back at our conversation, I wonder whether I was not perchance the innocent instigator of all this."

"Of all what ?" Nigel asked quickly.

"Of her setting her cap at you, if I must use plain language."

"You horrify me !" exclaimed Nigel, who in truth looked horrified and had turned pale. "What can have given you such an idea as that ?"

"Such ideas will occur to people of my age, alas ! You see, there is no denying that you must be a rather strong temptation to a girl who has no money and whose parents live in exile. Especially if she is sharp

enough to realise that, with the help of a little strategy, she might secure Rixmouth for her son and a handsome jointure for herself on your decease."

"But, Mr. Trenchard, you forget that I am not free and that she knows it."

"No ; I forget nothing. I am assuming, of course, that Miss Dallison is not hampered by scruples ; otherwise there would be no occasion for me to speak as I am doing at all. I need hardly add that this is a mere assumption and that I only suggest it to you as a possible reason for doubting her sincerity in the matter of a change of religion."

"In other words, you accuse her of the most shameless treachery and hypocrisy !"

"No, no ; I don't bring any accusation. What I have said is, as I tell you, nothing more than a suggestion, and if you like to call it an unwarrantable one, why—I can't contradict you."

Apparently Nigel did not consider it so ; for, after remaining silent a moment, he said with some suddenness, "Well, I shall have nothing more to do with her."

At this Mr. Trenchard laughed. "You must not quarrel with her, or she will naturally want an explanation. Don't quarrel and don't explain ; only—beware !"

"I hope," said Nigel presently, "you don't think it necessary to caution me against being false to Monica. I hope you give me credit for being at least a gentleman."

"Oh, my dear boy !"

"Because you seem to think Miss Dallison dangerous."

"Ah, well !" sighed Mr. Trenchard, "I am old, and I can't help knowing what the human race is. Women are dangerous ; a beautiful woman is doubly dangerous ;

a beautiful woman who has fixed her affections upon a given man is more than trebly dangerous to that man."

At that moment Nigel was not sorry that his elderly counsellor was deprived of sight; for the mention of Miss Dallison's affections brought the blood with a swift rush to his cheeks and he was conscious of looking uncommonly like a detected sinner. He was able, however, to control his voice in observing:

"This is a fresh charge. What you said before was that she might be plotting to secure a fortune for herself; you didn't flatter me by hinting that I had made a conquest."

"Perhaps you haven't, and I hope you haven't; yet I must own that there are signs which strike me as rather pointing that way. Anyhow, I am glad to have had this little talk with you, Nigel, and glad to have heard from your own lips that there isn't even a remote idea of infidelity in your mind."

"You may be quite sure of that," Nigel declared.

"I am absolutely sure of it, and I shall go away with my own mind at ease now."

"Are you going away, then?"

"Yes, I am off to Germany to submit myself to the eye-specialist who puts me through a course of treatment every year, with imperceptible results. He represents to me what Lourdes does to certain pathetic pilgrims of your communion; although nothing comes of these annual visits, I say to myself, 'Just once more!' And so it goes on."

"I shall miss you dreadfully."

"Upon my word, I am almost inclined to say that I hope you will; it is such a treat to think that one is of some little use. But, as far as I can judge, you are likely to be free from estate bothers for a considerable time to come, and if any should crop up you must

drop me a line. I'll give you my address. By the time that I return, Miss Dallison will have been restored to her family, I trust."

Nigel, on the homeward way, ruminated over old Humphry's advice—"Don't quarrel, don't explain, only beware!"—and said to himself that two thirds of it were sound. He was not sure that it would not be better for him to quarrel with Miss Dallison, and there would be no great difficulty in so doing; for her remarks upon religious subjects were often of a flippancy which might be taken as insulting by a controversialist who wanted to be insulted. In any case, he wanted to quarrel with her; he was perfectly clear about that.

Now it happened that he had made a sort of tacit appointment to meet her that afternoon at Knaresby, where Monica and she had been invited to lunch; so that an opportunity of giving prompt effect to his desire seemed to be ready to his hand, and perhaps that was why he was a good deal annoyed to learn, on reaching his destination, that she had gone out for a ride with Cuthbert Gretton. He made no remark; but his displeasure was so manifest that Monica anxiously asked him if he thought that Major and Mrs. Dallison would object to their daughter being thus committed for a whole afternoon to male companionship, without the protection of a duenna. Mrs. Scarth unhesitatingly answered for him.

"Bless your soul, no, my dear!" she laughed; "parents don't object to anything nowadays, and their children wouldn't listen to them if they did. I think I see myself forbidding Bessie to go out riding with Cuthbert!"

"I don't seem to see him asking me," that young lady remarked. "He was very careful to avoid honouring me with an invitation this afternoon."

"Well, my dear," observed her mother, "considering

that Ethel has your horse, I don't quite see how he could have asked you, unless he had offered to take you on a pillion."

Mr. Scarth expressed the general, but emphatic, opinion that if young people would sometimes condescend to listen to their elders they would be preserved from making fools of themselves as they too often did. He then proceeded to illustrate this proposition by a reference to the prosecution for poaching with which Nigel had recently menaced a humble neighbour of his. If anything could have been more ill-advised than such a threat, said he, it would have been its withdrawal. "It is seldom wise to point a pistol at a man's head; but it is simply suicidal to lower it when you find that you have failed to frighten him."

"I acted under advice," said Nigel curtly; for there were moments when he did not feel equal to embarking upon one of the prolonged arguments which his uncle's soul loved.

"And a very silly thing to do too!" retorted Mr. Scarth. "Heaven has granted you a certain amount of intelligence; why don't you use it?"

"Only because I agree with you that the counsel of one's elders is not to be despised," answered Nigel meekly, "and because I have a special respect for Mr. Trenchard's judgment."

"Ah, that is another matter! Humphry, who knows what he is about, besides being always on the side of peace, recommended you to withdraw, I understand. That, of course, was quite right of him, and you were quite right to follow his advice."

"I think I was. Only you said just now that to withdraw was suicidal," observed Nigel, not caring to plead that it was Mr. Trenchard who had urged him to prosecute in the first instance.

He did not get the best of the little passage of arms which ensued. In verbal controversy nobody ever did get the better of Robert Scarth, who was capable of contradicting himself ten times in as many minutes and then suggesting to his bewildered adversary, with a certain mournful compassion and forbearance, that further discussion could only be unprofitable. Nigel was glad to make his escape and grateful to Monica for departing from her usual formality to the extent of asking him to see her home.

"The carriage is coming for me," she said, as soon as they had set out on foot, "we ought to meet it presently. But I thought I wouldn't wait, for I saw that Mr. Scarth was worrying you to death."

He nodded and smiled at her. "Yes, it was very good of you. Uncle Robert does worry me, I confess. At least, he adds to my worries in a way that I ought not to allow him to do ; but sometimes, you know, the grasshopper is a burden."

Placid little Monica was probably exempt from any such humiliating experiences. She realised, however, that her future husband was a man of nervous, restless temperament, and she took some modest pride in the power which she had discovered that she possessed of soothing and pacifying him. Perhaps she did not choose quite the best possible method of exercising this when she began to talk about Ethel Dallison ; yet that topic did not appear to be an unwelcome one to him. He listened with apparent sympathy to her praises of her friend ; he laughed when she said how good she thought it of Ethel to remain and keep her company in their quiet neighbourhood ; he only indulged in a slight gesture of impatience when she confided to him, as a great secret, that she had hopes in connection with Ethel's evident liking for Mr. Gretton.

"It would hardly be a good marriage for either of them, though," he remarked.

"Not as far as money goes, I am afraid ; but money isn't everything, and he will be better off some day, I suppose. She won't mind being poor for a time if she really cares for him."

"I doubt her really caring for anybody but herself," said Nigel, with sudden asperity.

At this Monica looked much distressed. "How disappointing it is !" she exclaimed. "I saw that you didn't like her at first and that she didn't like you ; but lately you have seemed to get on so much better together, and I hoped you were making friends."

"We have got on and we have made friends," Nigel admitted, "in the sense that we have found things to talk about. All the same—I don't like Miss Dallison. She is not the sort of woman whom I could ever like."

"But why not ?" Monica asked.

Nigel took his betrothed's small hand and patted it affectionately. "Perhaps because she is such a very different sort of woman from you," he answered, smiling.

And the carriage making its appearance just then, the interview ended ; for Nigel declined a lift, upon the pretext that he had an appointment with his keeper which obliged him to walk across the fields.

It was true that he had made an appointment with the keeper ; otherwise his straitlaced conscience would not have suffered him to put forward that allegation. Surely it was also true that he did not like Ethel Dallison, who had obviously been fooling him, and in whose thirst for conversion he had never quite believed ! But here that troublesome conscience of his stepped in and wanted to know why, if he disliked her, he had been so vexed and disappointed by her desertion of

him that afternoon in favour of Cuthbert Gretton. It looked like jealousy; perhaps—for what is the use of self-examination if it be not honest?—perhaps it *was* jealousy. But then——?

“Then,” cried Nigel aloud, in resolute accents, “there is all the more reason for breaking with her. I suppose old Trenchard is right; a quarrel would be absurd and inconvenient for everybody. But I shall just quietly drop her, and if Gretton wants to marry her, he will be very welcome, so far as I am concerned; though I shall be rather sorry for him.”

Many and many thousands of times in the history of the human race have guileless men formed a similar determination. How many times they have carried it into effect women only know. About as often, perhaps, as women have allowed them to do so. Needless to say, Ethel Dallison had no notion of allowing Nigel Scarth to drop her, nor was she long in discovering the cause of his changed and distant demeanour. No later than on the following day, indeed, she extorted from him as full an account of his talk with old Humphry as she required to enable her to imagine the rest, and she likewise obtained, if not an actual apology, its virtual equivalent. She managed to make Nigel feel ashamed of himself; she also managed, before she let him go, to excite in his breast other feelings of which he felt ashamed, yet could not resist. He would certainly have done better to quarrel with her than to make friends again, and he knew it. Nevertheless, he did make friends, with a groan, hoping that Miss Dallison would soon leave England, relying upon his better self and crying to his worse self *Age retro, Satanas!*

A week elapsed, during which he suffered many things—amongst others, pangs of jealousy which he was fain to recognise as such and inwardly call by



their name. For although Ethel was very kind to him, and although they had more than one long colloquy, she was also very kind to Cuthbert Gretton, whose attentions were assiduous and undisguised. To all appearance she was giving the latter every encouragement; and yet Nigel had received assurances which led him to doubt her being really enamoured of Gretton. Not, to be sure, verbal assurances; but the eyes, as everybody knows, can sometimes be quite as explicit as the tongue, and Miss Dallison's were not less eloquent than lovely. Were they, Nigel wondered, instruments of truth or falsehood? Was their owner as bad as those soul-disturbing glances seemed to prove her, or worse? Good she could not be, since there could be no doubt that she was playing her friend Monica false; but had she at least the excuse, imputed to her by old Humphry, of having "fixed her affections" upon the man who half loved, half hated her? He was unable to make out what she was driving at, and this was the less surprising as she herself hardly knew.

At length, however, she was compelled to make a statement upon the subject by one whose methods were habitually downright and who may not have been wholly free from the jealousy by which his friend was tormented. It was on returning to Lannowe after a long ride, during which Ethel had taken exclusive possession of Nigel, while Monica and Cuthbert had been left to entertain one another, that the latter said all of a sudden:

"Do you know that you have very much the appearance of trying to turn Scarth's head, Miss Dallison? It may be unintentional; but I don't think Miss Ferrand quite likes it."

They were standing in the garden together, Monica having gone into the house to prepare tea and Nigel

having strolled away with Monsignor Nolan, who had met them when they dismounted. Ethel, tapping her boot with her riding-whip and gazing pensively at the wooded landscape, which had already begun to don autumnal tints, smiled after a fashion which her neighbour found inscrutable, although it was not really difficult to detect the demure triumph which she was at so little pains to conceal.

"Perhaps," she coolly replied, "it isn't unintentional, and perhaps I don't mean Monica to like it."

"Then," exclaimed the astonished and incensed Cuthbert, "all I can say is——"

He stopped short, conscious that it was out of the question, even for an angry man who had not been too well treated, to say what had been upon the tip of his tongue, and Ethel, with a laugh, rejoined :

"Oh, I know!—it is natural enough that you should be horrified. Yet I should think you must see as plainly as I do that poor Monica hasn't a chance of ever being happy with your friend. He, too, has a poor chance of ever being happy with her ; but that is of less consequence. It is she who must be rescued, if possible."

"And in order to rescue her you propose to marry the man yourself!"

"I don't think," answered Ethel, "that it will be necessary to proceed to such extremities ; I think my benevolent interference, of which you so evidently disapprove, has already accomplished all that I could hope for from it."

She would have been confirmed in this opinion if she had overheard the dialogue which was taking place between Nigel and Monsignor Nolan, who were pacing to and fro along a grassy alley within the field of her vision. She could not hear their words, but she could see their gestures, and possibly she could form a pretty

shrewd guess at what they were talking about. Meanwhile, she took in hand, with some success, the task of smoothing down Cuthbert, and she had almost persuaded that honest young man that her intentions were good, if her tactics were equivocal, when Nigel and the priest drew near. Nigel was pale, and his eyes looked even larger than usual. It was with a rather forced smile that he said to his friend :

"I suppose you don't want to finish your holiday by coming out to Tyrol with me, do you ?"

"I certainly do not," answered Cuthbert, quite taken aback. "Tyrol in the autumn!—what for? And how about the partridges?"

"You will be able to increase your personal bag by bringing down the partridges that I should have missed," answered the other. "Of course you will shoot over my land as often as you please; I'll give orders about it. As for me, I have always wished to see the Tyrolese Alps, and I haven't any particular duties to keep me at home just now. So, as the season is getting rather advanced, I shall be off at once."

Cuthbert stared at the priest, whose countenance was blandly expressionless, and then at Miss Dallison, to see how she was taking this abrupt announcement. She was taking it, so far as he could judge, with amused equanimity. She must of course understand that Nigel was running away from her. Was that what she wanted him to do, and did she perhaps assume that he was running away from Monica also? They all now moved towards the house, and, as Miss Dallison was the first to enter, followed by Nigel, Cuthbert made so bold as to pluck the priest's sleeve.

"I say," he whispered, "do you advocate this?"

"Nigel's run abroad, do you mean?" returned Monsignor Nolan, meeting his questioner's eyes with

goodhumoured innocence. "Indeed I do; he has been here a long time now, and a little change is good for everybody."

"Oh, I don't want to meddle; probably I'm not altogether in his confidence, and you, no doubt, are. But—he can't be going away to admire the scenery, you know."

"Why not? There are worse things than scenery to admire, as you may find out some fine day, Mr. Gretton," returned Monsignor Nolan, laughing. "If you mean that his going abroad is a bad compliment to Miss Ferrand, I'm not with you. Their engagement isn't a formal one, you must remember, and it's as well for them both to be put to the test of separation every now and then."

It was evident that Nigel's spiritual adviser knew more than he chose to say; so Cuthbert desisted from further attempts to draw him.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PASSIONATE PILGRIM

ON a dull afternoon in the month of October a young Englishman of distinguished appearance might have been seen making his way up the rue de Moscou, which he had only discovered by dint of repeated inquiries. Nigel Scarth's acquaintance with Paris was but slight, while his acquaintance with the rue de Moscou ought, as he was well aware, to have been non-existent; yet there he was, and not without exultation did he say to himself "Here I am at last!"

It had taken him a matter of six or seven weeks to reach his destination by a circuitous route which had embraced several provinces of the Austro-Hungarian empire; but it had been certain from the outset (although he himself would have vehemently denied the truth of such a statement) that he would end by visiting Paris, not to mention the somewhat unattractive street which he was now ascending. Had he been given to casuistry, he might have justified the step that he was about to take upon the plea that Miss Dallison's conversion was, after all, a possible event and that he, who had sown the good seed, was entitled, if not bound, to ascertain for himself whether it had germinated or not; but Nigel, whatever may have been his failings, was not a casuist; so he owed to his heart (which was beating

with more rapid pulsations than his pace warranted) that he was reverting to an evaded peril for the simple and sufficient, if deplorable, reason that he could not resist so doing. It had been wise to run away; he himself had recognised the wisdom of that course, as had also Monsignor Nolan, whose brisk, goodhumoured injunction of "Be off with you out of the country, you silly fellow, until you come to your senses again!" he had conscientiously endeavoured to obey. But he had not, unfortunately, come to his senses after the fashion contemplated by his adviser, nor had absence and a continuous mental struggle in any way lessened the strange fascination which a woman whom he disliked and dreaded had for him. He therefore felt, with a sort of fierce glee, that there was not the slightest excuse for him, although he had a conventional one ready in the shape of a wish expressed by Monica, who in her last letter to him had written, "Do go and look up Ethel as you pass through Paris. I am sure she will be so glad to see you again." Unsuspecting Monica, who had not at all minded his leaving her, who punctually corresponded with him at stated intervals and whose implicit faith in him it seemed a peculiarly base proceeding to abuse!

As he turned in under the archway of the house of which he was in search an elderly gentleman, who had just descended from a *fiacre*, lurched up against him and apologised. This was Major Dallison in his usual post-meridian condition. He preceded Nigel up the stairs, stumbling heavily at the top of the first flight and ludicrously pawing the air in a premature attempt to ascend the second.

"Desp'rately short-sighted," he remarked, in affable explanation to the stranger. "Englishman, I see," he went on. "Looking for my quarters, p'rhaps? Dallison,

my name is. Third floor, sorry to say, but—but we'll get there in time."

Nigel, trying not to look as disgusted as he felt, mentioned his own name and was proceeding to state that he had had the pleasure of making Miss Dallison's acquaintance in Yorkshire when the other effusively cut him short.

"My dear sir, no int'ruction—interduction, I mean—necess'ry! Know all about you!—d'lighted to see you! Any friend of my friend Lord Lannowe's—only too charmed!"

It really was not often that Major Dallison was so far gone as this by daylight; but the weather had suddenly become cold, and the measures which he had taken to counteract an incipient chill had been rather too radical. He seized his visitor's arm, with the double object of evincing friendliness and steadying his own gait; the result of which was that Nigel ultimately entered the presence of Mrs. and Miss Dallison at a species of undignified canter. He was much confused, and he looked so; but the two ladies, after exchanging rapid glances, maintained a creditable equanimity.

"Most kind of you to come, Mr. Scarth," said the elder, when he had stammered out something about Miss Ferrand's wish and his personal desire to renew an agreeable acquaintance; "I hope you bring good news of our friends in Yorkshire."

"Hasn't come from Yorkshire, bless you!" chuckled the Major, whom Nigel had shaken off, and who had dropped in a heap upon a chair. "Been abroad for the last don't know how long—heard all about that from Ethel, y' know." He turned to Nigel and added, with a slow, carefully executed wink, "Given 'em the slip, eh? Out on a bit of a bust to wind up with—what? All right! *we* won't give you away; *we're* safe!"

It was so impossible to tell what he might or might not say next that Mrs. Dallison hastily got up and, walking across to him, whispered a few words in his ear. But the attempt failed.

"No such thing!" he cried, "never better in m' life! Now, look here—just you mind your own bus'ness and leave me to look after mine. This is opportunity may not r'cur. Here's Mr. Scarth—friend o' mine, friend o' Lord Lannowe's, plenty money, and here's Ethel——"

At this juncture Miss Dallison approached her father, deftly hoisted him on to his feet by placing her hand under his elbow and marched him off to the nearest door, through which Mrs. Dallison, in obedience to a signal from her daughter, accompanied him. He made no resistance, nor, although there was an audible altercation outside, did he reappear. Ethel returned imperturbably to the fireside, where Nigel was standing, and remarked:

"My father is subject to periodical attacks of influenza, which are apt to affect his head. The only thing for him to do is to go to bed as soon as he feels one coming on."

Nigel said he believed that influenza manifested itself in many different ways. He was divided between admiration of the girl's presence of mind, distress at his own ill-timed intrusion and unholy joy at the accident which appeared to promise him at least a few minutes of private conversation with Miss Dallison.

"You don't seem surprised to see me," he remarked, as she did not speak after resuming her seat.

"I am not surprised," was her calm reply.

"You expected me to come here? Then you must know more about me than I know about myself."

"That is not impossible. Don't we all know more about one another than we do about ourselves?"

"I should say not. In any case, I don't see how you can have been sure of my coming to Paris."

"Oh, I didn't profess to have been sure; I doubt whether anybody could ever be sure of you; you are not that sort of person. On the other hand, you are the sort of person at whose proceedings one would never feel much surprised."

Nigel eyed her frowningly, interrogatively. Was she laughing at him? he wondered. Did she despise him? Had he perhaps been mistaken, and had old Humphry Trenchard been mistaken, in attributing to her schemes which, in consideration of her wretched home surroundings, she might after all have been almost pardoned for entertaining?

"It is true," he remarked, with a certain bitterness, "that you did not show the slightest surprise at my leaving home."

She laughed retrospectively. "Oh, well, you must not expect to astonish everybody; you were quite successful in startling your relations, I believe."

"I did not want to startle my relations, and I don't care whether they were startled or not," Nigel was beginning, when Mrs. Dallison re-entered the room, with profuse apologies for her enforced absence. Mrs. Dallison, who had been accurately informed as to young Mr. Scarth's position, pecuniary and other, saw no object in leaving him alone with her daughter. She said:

"I am afraid you must have thought me very unceremonious; but my husband, as you saw, is—is not quite himself this afternoon, and——"

"I have explained that influenza takes that form with him," interpolated Ethel.

"Oh, yes—influenza," murmured the poor woman, twisting her watch-chain nervously between her thin fingers.

She was accustomed to make little secret of her husband's intemperance, which indeed was notorious; the edge of her sensibilities had been blunted long ago. She went on, in wearied, plaintive accents which intimated clearly that she would be much obliged if this young man would be so kind as to go away :

"You are only passing through Paris, I suppose ; nobody does more than pass through at this time of year."

"Some people," remarked her daughter, "don't even do as much. Mr. Gretton, for instance, who held out hopes which haven't been fulfilled."

Nigel pricked up his ears. "Did Gretton talk of coming over here ?" he asked.

"He talked of it," answered Ethel, smiling ; "he hasn't done it, I am sorry to say, and I presume he won't now."

"It really isn't a matter for much regret that he hasn't," said Mrs. Dallison irritably. "I believe he is a friend of yours, Mr. Scarth, but that, unfortunately, doesn't prevent him from being a thoroughly commonplace and uninteresting person."

This shot, which was fired foolishly at the invulnerable Ethel, brought down Nigel, who replied, with unconcealed displeasure :

"If it is commonplace to be a gentleman in every sense of the word, as well as a good sportsman and a staunch friend, I suppose Cuthbert Gretton is what you call him. For my own part, I only wish I had half his claims to be pronounced interesting !"

Miss Dallison's eyes were fixed with a singular intentness upon the speaker while he paid this handsome tribute to his absent friend. Perhaps she thought that, all things considered, he was strangely magnanimous, and perhaps he was so. In truth Nigel, though an unstable

and self-distrustful man, was not a small one. It may have been in order to test him still further that Ethel remarked :

"It has often struck me that you would be glad to change places with Mr. Gretton. Or rather, I think you would like to put him in your place."

"I should indeed!" Nigel answered. "He would fill admirably the shoes which don't fit me, and if, one of these days, I were to return to the only place that does fit me—— But that won't happen. Well, you, at any rate, don't find him uninteresting, Miss Dallison."

"I find him considerably less interesting than you," was the reply, at once flattering and truthful, which it pleased Miss Dallison to make to an interrogative assertion of which the suppressed anxiety was not lost upon her.

But she had not, it seemed, much more of an encouraging nature to say. She did not try to get rid of her mother, who obviously had no intention of stirring, and after another ten minutes of somewhat laboured discourse, Nigel reluctantly rose. He had wanted to see her again, and he had seen her. If he had desired anything in addition to that, so much the worse for him, since she evidently did not mean to grant him any additional concessions. It was not suggested that he should call a second time, and Ethel, on taking leave of him, remarked :

"How I envy you going back to England! There are all sorts of things to be done in England in October, and there is absolutely nothing to be done in Paris. I am reduced to resolutely tramping round and round the Parc Monceau every morning of my life to keep myself in health."

He may have been a little dull-witted ; for not until he was out in the street did the significance of a wholly

uncalled-for statement which she had been at the pains of enunciating in italics, as it were, dawn upon him. However, when it did dawn upon him, his heart gave a great leap of joy. She did wish to meet him in private, then, after all!

Naturally she did, and she would have had the same wish even if no other motive than curiosity had impelled her thereto. That she obtained what she wished for on the following morning was, of course, a foregone conclusion; but it may be mentioned as a characteristic touch that when Nigel advanced to greet her along one of the muddy paths of the Parc Monceau, which was all sodden and dragged after a night of rain, she exclaimed:

"How late you are! I thought you would have been here a quarter of an hour ago. But perhaps I didn't mention any time. Now that I come to think of it, I believe I didn't—on account of my mother and the proprieties."

Her words and her tone jarred upon him. They were not in the best taste, he thought, and what may have displeased him even more was that she had a good deal the air of laughing at him.

"It seems," he observed grimly, "that you always know beforehand what I am going to do."

"There was no need to possess the gift of prophecy," she returned, "in order to foresee that you would take your morning walk in the direction which I made so bold as to suggest to you."

"I suppose not. I wonder whether you also foresaw what I should say."

"Not for certain; otherwise it wouldn't have been worth while to get my feet wet, would it? Still I can guess that the first question you have to ask me relates to my religious progress."

"Well?"

"Well, I haven't progressed much ; I think I am about where you left me. After all, you can't demand progress on the part of a disciple whom you chose to abandon so unceremoniously."

"I take it that you know why I did that," said Nigel, drilling holes in the moist earth with his stick.

"I am so sorry to be obliged to confess that I don't ; for I should have liked you to go on believing in my omniscience. However, I will hazard another guess. You went away because you thought that your departure was the best preliminary step that you could take towards breaking off your engagement to Monica."

Nigel shook his head. "No ; that was not my reason. I am in honour bound to be true to my engagement, and it will never be broken off by me. But I think—or rather I am sure—that you want it to be broken off. Why?"

She responded by a counter-query. "Why did you leave Yorkshire?"

After remaining silent for a moment, he replied curtly, "I shall not tell you."

"Ah, then I may fairly decline to tell you why I should be glad to see you and Monica freed from one another."

"You admit, then," he retorted quickly, "that you would be glad to see us parted, and you admit that you did your best to part us."

At this she shrugged her shoulders. "I didn't make that last admission ; but you are welcome to it, if it increases your happiness in any way."

"I doubt whether anything could increase my happiness or lessen my unhappiness," answered Nigel moodily.

"Not even the conversion of a heretic?" she asked, with a smile and a change of intonation which swiftly recalled to him memories of brighter days.

But he steeled himself against cajolery. "You were only making a fool of me," he answered bitterly; you never really contemplated becoming a Catholic."

"There you are wrong; I did contemplate it, and I contemplate it still. Only I must have time. You yourself would allow, I suppose, that an insincere conversion is a worse thing than scepticism. I want to be a Catholic, not because your religion would make me good, for it does not always seem to have that effect——"

"Oh, I understand," interrupted Nigel; "what you say is only too true, and—and it adds to my sin."

"What sin?" she inquired, with an air of innocence which at once deprived her of her half-recovered influence over him. Then, perceiving immediately that she had made a false step, she wisely left it alone and resumed:

"No, not because it would make me good, but because it appears to offer so many consolations, and after what you saw yesterday, you can believe, I daresay, that I am often in need of consolations."

He nodded and sighed; but, as he said nothing, she resumed: "Religion is a substitute and, provided that one can get up enough enthusiasm for it, it may be an ample one; only—aren't there moments when you feel inclined to throw the whole thing overboard and seek your happiness where you can find it?"

"You know there are," he answered; "I suppose that is why you ask."

"I asked for the pleasure of hearing you confess that you are no better than I am. I wonder where we shall end, you and I!"

"Sometimes," said Nigel, "I think that I shall end by going to the Devil."

He had almost the appearance of inviting her to accompany him to that destination. He drew a step

nearer, his burning eyes forced hers to meet them, he was visibly at her mercy up to a certain point. But only up to a certain point ; she had the wit to realise that and to divine that, happen what might, he would never offer marriage to a Protestant. She was ready, it is true, to abjure Protestantism ; but the time had by no means come yet for taking so decisive a step. Moreover, she did not love the man, which counted for something with her, although she was always telling herself that she could not afford to be sentimental. There was another man whom she did love, and—there were possibilities which were becoming more and more apparent to her. As for Nigel, she had ascertained from him all that she had wished to ascertain, and dismissal, accompanied by a douche of cold water, seemed to be what he chiefly required. She therefore rejoined lightly :

“ Oh, I hope not. But that, after all, is your affair.”

“ In other words,” said he, frowning, “ it is a matter of complete indifference to you whether I go to the Devil or not.”

“ Please don’t think me so inhuman as that, Mr. Scarth,” she returned, with a slight laugh ; “ I only meant that I personally can neither hold you back nor drive you on. I don’t pretend to wish that your engagement to Monica should hold, and, in spite of what you said just now, I don’t think it will hold ; but it may come to an end perhaps without your having recourse to quite such violent measures.”

It was always Nigel’s way to be easily discouraged. Possibly he had good reason to be so in the present instance ; yet not many men, under the circumstances, would have concluded at once, as he did, that it would be useless to prolong the interview. He said :

“ You have been rather a puzzle to me, Miss Dallison,

but I think I understand now what you have been aiming at all along. Well, it looks as if you had been successful, or were likely to be. Now I must not keep you standing any longer in this damp place."

He raised his hat, without offering his hand, and drew back.

"Where are you going?" she asked, half-involuntarily.

"I thought I had told you. It is a goal to which there are plenty of short cuts."

He bowed, turned on his heel and marched off, thus accomplishing something of a dramatic exit. He was entitled to such comfort as he could obtain from that small achievement, considering how utterly humiliated he felt and how convinced he was that Miss Dallison's only feeling for him was one of amused disdain.

Her sentiments, as she watched his retreating figure, were in truth not far removed from those ascribed to her.

"Poor fellow!" she mused; "I suppose he must really be fond of me, although he has such a mean opinion of me; I suppose I might oust Monica and put myself in her place, if it were good enough. But it isn't good enough; I didn't reject Sol Wharton for that. He won't go to the dogs either; he will throw himself upon the bosom of Mother Church again, instead. Which will be so much better for him and for everybody else!"

CHAPTER XIV

DISSIPATION UNDER DIFFICULTIES

"**L**OST the hounds?" echoed Lord Lannowe, in reply to a question addressed to him while he was jogging homewards on a November afternoon. "Well, yes, unless you prefer to put it more accurately, Mr. Trenchard, and say that the hounds and the field have lost me, cunning as I have learned to be in my old age. There was a time when I used to despise the roadsters, but I have lived to join them—and to share their occasional disappointments philosophically. By living long enough one manages to get upon tolerably intimate terms with disappointment, I find."

Old Humphry, who was driving his mail phaeton along the miry lanes, and who had pulled up on overtaking his neighbour, responded with an eloquent shrug of the shoulders.

"To whom do you say it! Yet one perseveres and one goes on hoping against hope."

"I am afraid from that," said Lord Lannowe sympathetically, "that your visit to Germany has brought about no encouraging results."

"Absolutely none that I can detect, although I am assured that there is a shade of improvement. But my disappointments don't end with the annual one this time, I am sorry to say. Bailey, aren't we getting somewhere near Rixmouth hill?"

"Just upon it, sir," answered the man who was seated beside him.

"I thought so. You might jump out and stretch your legs by walking to the top while I talk to Lord Lannowe."

He allowed his attendant time to get out of hearing before he went on: "The fact is that I am by no means easy about my young friend Nigel Scarth. Are you?"

"Is there any reason why I should be uneasy?" inquired Lord Lannowe a little anxiously. "I really know next to nothing about him, except that he is a deuce of a long time in returning home and that he is in London just now. He corresponds with my daughter; I couldn't very well forbid that, you know."

"Oh, he corresponds with Miss Ferrand? I am glad and I am sorry to hear that he does. His doing so looks as if he wanted to reserve himself a door open for repentance; but then again it seems rather to deprive him of the straightforwardness in good and in evil which I looked upon as one of his saving graces."

"What do you mean?" asked Lord Lannowe.

The old man sighed. "I mean that the poor boy—for really he isn't much more than a boy—is sowing the wild oats which I suppose most of us sow in our early years when we get the chance. I imagine that he never had the chance until now, and that, of course, is a great pity."

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes, I looked him up in London the other day; I felt bound to do so, in consequence of information which had come to my ears. I tried not to preach more than I could help, for experience has taught me how little use there is in preaching; but I did point out to him that, religion and morality apart, he was neglecting some obvious duties."

"His duty to my daughter?"

"I mentioned that ; I did not dwell upon it, because it occurred to me that remonstrances upon that subject might come rather better from you than from me. But I spoke of the estate, which I may say that I am practically managing for him, and the only reply I got was that he was sure the estate would be admirably looked after by me. He was not in a tractable mood, unfortunately."

Lord Lannowe here put a few direct queries and was frankly answered. "Well," said he, "I can only regard that sort of thing as a deliberate insult to my daughter. I shall write and tell him so, and I shall add that his engagement to her, which was never a formal one and which I never quite liked, must now be considered at an end."

"I hope," said old Humphry wistfully, "you won't do that. You are entitled, no doubt, to take such a step ; only I greatly fear that, if you do, the poor lad will sink hopelessly."

"Let him sink !" cried Lord Lannowe, who was a good deal incensed. "Is it my business to keep his head above water ?"

"No ; but it seems to be mine. I happen to be fond of him, you see ; I believe there is a great deal of good in him, and when he hears that I have betrayed him to you—for I presume he will take my having spoken to you as a betrayal——"

"Oh, I shall not allude to you, Mr. Trenchard ; from what you tell me, his present mode of life is a matter of common knowledge."

"Thank you ; I should be glad, both for my own sake and for his, if you could avoid mentioning my name. I felt that I ought to say something to you, Lord Lannowe ; but I confess I hoped you would agree

with me in thinking that the case is not one which calls for immediate and extreme severity."

"I think," answered Lord Lannowe, "that it calls for the manner in which I propose to deal with it."

"He is not irreclaimable, believe me," pleaded the other.

"Oh, I daresay he isn't; I hope not, I'm sure. But I am not going to intrust the task of reclaiming him to the hands of a mere child, like Monica."

"You won't try the effect of writing him a sharp letter, then, and telling him that he must either return home at once or take the consequences?"

"No, Mr. Trenchard, I won't. I understand your point of view; you like him and you think, as I believe Nolan does, that he would be all right if he were married. But I object to such experiments where my daughter is concerned. Moreover, I think that when a man who is more or less engaged behaves as you tell me that young Scarth is behaving he is a bad-hearted fellow, and I don't wish to have anything more to do with him."

Within forty-eight hours, therefore, Nigel received a perfectly courteous, but unequivocal intimation of Lord Lannowe's sentiments. He would have received this even earlier, had not his lordship deemed it advisable before writing to hear anything that Monsignor Nolan might have to say, and also to satisfy himself that his daughter's heart was not in danger of being broken; but at any rate it arrived quite soon enough to make its recipient feel thoroughly ashamed.

"It is only what I have been asking for all these weeks," the young man muttered, after perusing the missive which restored to him complete independence; "but it was abominable of me to ask for it!"

His life since his arrival in London had been, by his way of thinking, altogether abominable. He had, at all

events, got no sort of satisfaction out of it, deliberate and unscrupulous self-indulgence being outside the range of his capacities. He had, however, done what in him lay to carry out his proclaimed intention of going to the deuce, being urged thereto by two motives, one of which he had not disguised from himself, silly though it was. Somewhat in the temper of a naughty child, he wanted Ethel Dallison to know that she had been the ruin of him, and he liked to think that the dissipations which gave him so little pleasure would be reported to her in due season. But not until Lord Lannowe's letter reached him did he realise that it had been his wish to make himself impossible as Monica Ferrand's future husband, and the discovery humiliated him far more than old Humphry Trenchard's homily or the persistent wailings of his own outraged conscience had done. For debauchery excuses, good, bad or indifferent, can always be found; but there is no imaginable excuse for a traitor who contrives to shroud his faithlessness under the plea that he has been compulsorily released from his pledges.

This Nigel could hardly say, in replying to Lord Lannowe; but he did acknowledge himself unpardonable, adding that he was at least as conscious as his correspondent could be of how well he deserved to forfeit what he had forfeited. He further expressed his appreciation of the very temperate language in which sentence had been pronounced upon him and the extremely considerate remarks by which it had been followed. For Lord Lannowe had been generous, as well as sensible, enough to write: "Quarrels between near neighbours are awkward, inconvenient things, and I do not think that there is any need for this unfortunate business to bring about one. I shall announce no more than that I do not, after reflection, feel able to

sanction your marriage with my daughter ; I shall give no reasons, nor, I presume, will you. As for the sort of life that you may see fit to lead, that ceases henceforth to be any affair of mine ; I will only on this occasion take the liberty, as an old man, of warning you that there are certain conventional restrictions which it is not permitted to transgress. You will understand, of course, that I refer to developments which might conceivably arise after your return to Rixmouth and of which it might be necessary for me to take some notice."

Nigel had a rather dreary little laugh over this well-meant piece of worldly wisdom. He certainly did not propose to scandalise the county, nor, for the matter of that, did he contemplate any immediate return to Rixmouth, where he had an admirable *locum tenens* in the person of the experienced Mr. Trenchard. What he precisely did contemplate he might have found some difficulty in stating ; for the bachelor quarters in Duke Street where he was now domiciled were not much to his liking, while the boon companions of a former period with whom it had suited him to resume relations (since he knew of no others) disgusted him. Not for nothing had he embraced monasticism, nor perhaps could there have been a stronger testimony to his vocation for that career than his total inability to enjoy, even for a day, what may be described as its reverse. There is no need to describe in further detail our poor hero's doings at this time. He was tragically, comically unlike what he was making believe so hard to be ; he had no decent friends, except Cuthbert Gretton, whom he avoided, and the worst feature in his case was that he loved a woman whom he believed to be a bad as well as a cruel one. Anybody who wished him well would have seen that it was at least indispensable to get him out of London forthwith.

No doubt that was why Monsignor Nolan, who not only wished him well but felt a certain responsibility for him, appeared at his rooms one afternoon and read him a lecture which differed in several essential respects from that previously delivered by old Humphry. Priests, of course, have weapons which cannot be used by the laity, and Monsignor Nolan was so capable of wielding these upon occasion that it did not take him long to reduce his penitent to submission. It was not until he came to the chapter of direct, peremptory injunctions that the latter began to jib.

"Oh, I can't possibly show my face in Yorkshire!" Nigel objected; "it would be out of the question for me to do that."

"Nonsense, my dear boy! You must take the leap some day, and the longer you look at it the less you'll like it. Don't be afraid of his lordship or Miss Ferrand; they'll say nothing to make you feel uncomfortable. To speak plainly, one of them is glad enough to be rid of you, and the other——"

"Ah!—what about the other?"

Monsignor Nolan took a pinch of snuff. "I'm sorry to hurt your vanity; but if you want the truth—well, I'm afraid the truth is that she's very willing to obey orders. Mind, I don't say that she isn't fond of you."

"I have treated her disgracefully," said Nigel.

"You have; but I can certify that she bears no malice. Come! you ought to be glad of that."

"I am very glad indeed. I suppose, after all, it is no great trouble to her to forgive me, seeing that she never really loved me. Miss Dallison knew that all along, and made her plans accordingly."

"Ah!—and what were Miss Dallison's plans, pray?"

"Oh, simply to part us. She told me so herself."

"I wouldn't," observed Monsignor Nolan, taking

another pinch of snuff, "accept any woman's assertion about her own motives as conclusive. Especially if she laid claim to simple ones. Now tell me, would you be afraid to meet her again?"

"No," answered Nigel, after a pause; "there isn't anything to be afraid of now."

"I ask because I hear that she is to be invited to Lannowe again for Christmas, and the chances are that she'll accept."

"I am not afraid of her now," Nigel repeated; "she has no heart."

"That isn't a very good reason; still I think it would be better for you to meet her—and watch her."

"Have you watched her?" Nigel asked.

"I did, so far as I had the opportunity; but I can't pretend to have discovered what her game is. I saw that she had one."

"I wonder how!"

"Well, it was easy enough to perceive that she wouldn't have risked giving offence to two such useful friends as Lord Lannowe and Miss Ferrand by making a dead set at you unless she had had reasons, and I doubted, saving your presence, whether pure affection for you was one of them."

"Affection for Miss Ferrand may have been her reason, though."

"It may—and if it was I'll eat my hat! But why waste time in discussing her? For you she's an extinct volcano by this time and, when all's said, you never were in love with her."

"Do you suppose," asked Nigel despondently, yet in the tone of one who really seeks information, "that I should have plunged into shame and degradation for her sake if I hadn't been in love with her?"

"Why not? Any woman could tell you that such

things happen every day. You have come to your senses now, though, and you will be at home before the week is out, I trust."

Nigel gave the required promise—not unwillingly. He was sick of London, sick of himself, sick of abortive attempts to be what he was not. He did not at all want to return to Rixmouth ; yet he recognised that, as Monsignor Nolan had pointed out, he would have to do so sooner or later, since flight to Lew Abbey (an alternative which had more than once suggested itself to him) could scarcely, under existing circumstances, have any other result than rejection. What the kindhearted priest's hopes still were was evident enough ; but Nigel was under no illusion as to their ever being fulfilled. At a given moment Monica Ferrand might possibly have saved him ; the moment had passed and would not recur ; his ultimate salvation or perdition must depend upon himself, not upon any other mortal, whether man or woman. He did not, for instance, think that Ethel Dallison any longer had the power to ruin him. Before taking leave of his ghostly adviser, he mentioned that he should like to invite Cuthbert Gretton to dine, and was naturally asked why he announced so blameless an intention.

"I thought you might not approve," he answered, "and I don't wish to conceal anything from you. Nor do I wish to conceal anything from Gretton, who is the only intimate friend I have in the world, and who is in some danger—well, I won't say of being deceived as I have been, for Miss Dallison never more than half deceived me—but who unquestionably admires her. You must have noticed that."

Monsignor Nolan endeavoured to suppress a sudden wave of hilarity and was partially successful. "By all means dine with your friend," said he, "and

relate your experiences to him and flourish danger signals under his nose. It will relieve you, and you won't do him any harm, if you don't do him much good. It isn't likely that Miss Dallison will do him any great harm either, for I doubt whether he has as much as a thousand a year to his name."

One of the results of Nigel's retirement from the world at a time of life when most young men are entering it was that he belonged to no London club; so it was at a restaurant that Cuthbert—solicited by telegram and fortunately disengaged—joined him the next evening. The two friends met with some inevitable embarrassment and reserve, neither being quite sure of the other's mental attitude; but this was speedily dispelled by the candour with which Nigel proceeded to lay his soul bare. He said in conclusion:

"You see what an irremediable mess I have made of my affairs; I only hope that, after hearing my story, you won't be tempted to follow suit."

"I? But I'm not engaged to be married to anybody," said Cuthbert. "I'm awfully sorry, old man, that it's all over between you and Miss Ferrand, and I can't see why it should be——"

"Then," interrupted Nigel impatiently, "I must have failed to make myself intelligible, though I thought I had spoken as plainly as it was possible to speak."

"Oh, of course I understand how the thing came to pass, and I know Miss Dallison meant it to come to pass. Still, you don't speak as if you were fond of her—quite the contrary."

"However much I may detest her, I can't undo her work, so far as I am concerned. Besides, I don't wish to undo it; Monica is well rid of me. But it is allowable to warn you that she is not to be trusted."

"It isn't necessary," answered the other, smiling;

"I discovered very early in our acquaintance that she was not given to running straight."

"You were very much attracted by her, for all that," persisted Nigel, bending forward across the table, with an anxious, almost angry light in his eyes.

"I don't deny it, my dear chap; who wouldn't be attracted by her? I don't intend to marry her, though, and if I did, she would never be so blind to her own interests as to marry me. So I am safe enough. I wish I could think that you were as safe from her as you pretend to be."

"I pretend nothing," Nigel declared; "I don't even pretend that I should be safe if she were to beckon to me. But she will do no such thing; it isn't on my account that she is coming back to Lannowe for Christmas. It is a fact that she is coming back, isn't it?"

"Yes, I believe so; and another fact which may interest you is that I am going to spend Christmas at Knaresby, as usual."

"I thought as much!"

"Of course you did. Hence these disinterested admonitions, eh? But really, old man, I think you stand more in need of that sort of thing than I do, and I should like to return the favour if I could do it without giving offence."

"Admonish me, then," answered Nigel, smiling; "I have been brought far too low in every sense to claim the privilege of being offended."

"All right; I'll give you what I believe to be sound advice, upon the off chance of your taking it. In the first place, go home without loss of time, and be forgiven. They won't forgive you in a week; that would be asking rather too much of them; but they will as soon as they are convinced that you have steadied down and

are going to lead a decent life for the future. In the second place, mind what you are about with old Trenchard, who seems to have got you under his thumb, and who——”

“He has been the best of friends to me,” interrupted Nigel warmly.

“I don't know so much about that ; the proof of the pudding is in the eating. What I do know is that he has contrived to ingratiate himself with your tenants and to make some of them dislike you.”

“You are quite mistaken ; it was I who unfortunately made some of them dislike me.”

“Yes, by following his instructions. I may be prejudiced, but it strikes me that he is an uncommonly cunning old fox, and I shouldn't be inclined to trust him a yard farther than I could see him.”

“I know you don't like him,” said Nigel. “I do, and I should be very ungrateful if I didn't ; though I confess that he put my back up a short time ago by preaching to me. I thought he might have understood that if my own conscience and my own priests couldn't hold me in, his rebukes weren't likely to do much good. Well—anything more ? ”

“I am in danger of coming under the same condemnation as old Trenchard, I'm afraid ; but I'll risk it and say one thing more. Don't keep your eyes so persistently turned upon yourself. People who get into that habit naturally contract a squint, which prevents them from getting a clear view of their neighbours. There !—now I've done.”

“And you haven't offended me,” said Nigel. “What you say about introspection is true enough ; I am too much given that way, no doubt. As for the first part of your advice, I am going to act upon it ; though not with the object that you name. What will become of

me ultimately I can't foresee ; but I think you may take it as certain now that I shall never marry."

"I am glad to say," returned Cuthbert, "that I look forward confidently to seeing you married to Miss Fer-rand before you are much older. Now, if you haven't anything better to do, we might stroll round to my club and have a smoke."

CHAPTER XV

SLEIGHS AND SNOW-SHOES

THE climate of these islands, in addition to providing their inhabitants with a topic of never-failing interest, has perhaps played a more important part in the formation of the national character than is generally realised. All sorts of things may be said against us (the number and the somewhat startling nature of them may be gathered any day from a perusal of the leading foreign newspapers); but it will be admitted by our least benevolent critics that we do take defeat pretty well, and this is probably because we are so accustomed to being totally defeated by the weather. Farmers, market-gardeners, sportsmen, our hopes are for ever being wrecked at the last moment, and we grumble, upon the whole, wonderfully little. Those who make the most fuss are always dwellers in cities, who suffer least. Cuthbert Gretton, although an involuntary Londoner, had been born and bred in the country, and doubtless that was why all he said, after seating himself in the Great Northern express which was to take him to Yorkshire for his Christmas holiday and noting the first small flakes of snow which evidently presaged a heavy fall, was "What a bore!" It was the more of a bore because the snow was accompanied by a frost which was certain to strengthen towards night and because Uncle Robert, in one of those generous moods which

were apt to come upon him at the most unexpected moments, had purchased a hunter as a Christmas present for his nephew. Little prospect was there now of being able to test the value of the gift, while there was a very fair chance of its being withdrawn; for Robert Scarth hated to waste money.

Cuthbert, however, lighted his pipe philosophically, unfolded a newspaper, which he did not read, and gave himself up to meditations which were not altogether gloomy, despite the black sky and the bitter cold. He had always had a good time at Knaresby in winter, and he looked forward to a good time now, even though hunting should prove impossible. What he no longer looked forward to with any pleasure was the resumption of his intimacy with Ethel Dallison. It had taken him some little time to make up his mind about that young lady, and for a moment his heart had been in peril; but what he had seen and heard during the summer, supplemented by Nigel's narrative, had sufficed to enlighten him. He did not want to have anything more to do with her, and he was determined that he would have no more to do with her than he could help. In that way perhaps he might hope to escape Bessie's unremitting, unrelenting chaff, which, he had found, became rather trying to the temper in the long run.

Once upon a time, when they were both children, Bessie and he had exchanged vows of eternal fidelity. He remembered the circumstance very well, although she had no doubt forgotten it, and he could imagine how heartily she would laugh, were she to be informed that he still treasured a lock of hair which she had bestowed upon him in that callow period. Well, one cherishes these absurd, inanimate objects out of a sort of sentiment for the past and a futile clinging to what is dead and gone. Between Cuthbert and his cousin

there survived hardly so much as a friendly feeling ; but that, as he said to himself, was wholly and solely her fault. The meekest and most goodhumoured of men ends by getting tired of being always snubbed, always turned into ridicule, always reminded of his insignificance.

He sighed, lighted a second pipe and glanced at his paper, from which he learned, amongst other interesting announcements, that "Lord Lannowe, who, with his daughter the Hon : Monica Ferrand, has been visiting the Duke and Duchess of Leith, has returned to Lannowe, where he will entertain a small party for Christmas. There is, we are assured, no foundation for the report which has been circulated of an engagement between Miss Ferrand and Mr. Nigel Scarth of Rixmouth Castle, the young man who, not very long ago, quitted a monastery in order to become a large landed proprietor."

"I suppose," mused Cuthbert, "that means that it is coming on again ; when reports are contradicted in the newspapers one generally understands that they are only premature. Well, so much the better. Nigel has eaten humble pie and has been forgiven, I trust."

He had neither seen nor heard anything of his friend since the evening when they had dined together ; but then he had really been very busy. Perhaps he found Nigel's affairs less engrossing as a subject of reflection than those with which he had previously been occupied ; for he soon fell asleep, and did not wake until he reached York, where he had to change carriages. Then, just as he was stepping into the slower train which was bound for his destination, he was smartly tapped on the back by a young lady, wrapped in furs, who remarked :

"Nice hunting weather, isn't it ? It's just about all

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we shall do to make our way home from the station, I can tell you !”

“Hullo, Bessie ! is that you ?” was the surprised and perhaps rather lame rejoinder which her greeting elicited from him.

“Well, it looks like it, doesn't it ?” she returned.

It looked like a pretty girl, with clear, healthy eyes and a bright colour. There are moments when we seem on a sudden to see familiar faces for the first time as they really are. Or is it that there are moments when something causes us to see them at their very best, and that we retain that impression permanently, despite less becoming subsequent conditions ? The mortal who can always distinguish illusion from reality must needs be an exceptionally clever mortal, and it may likewise be predicated of him that he will never be a happy one. Cuthbert, who, although a promising barrister, was not quite so clever as that, realised little more than that he heartily rejoiced in the good luck which had given him his cousin as a fellow-traveller. She explained that she had been staying a few days with some frozen-out, fox-hunting friends, and very candidly added that she had timed her return home so as to coincide with his arrival. Bessie could be as nice as possible when she chose ; the pity was that for such a long time past she had scarcely ever chosen to be so !

When he had seated himself opposite to her in a compartment which the guard, who knew them both very well, undertook to keep free from intruders she gave him the latest local intelligence, of which only a part had any bearing upon the progress of the present narrative.

“Yes, Nigel has just returned to Rixmouth,” she said, in reply to a question of his. “He has been at Lew Abbey, you know. Didn't you know ? Well, he has ;

and it seems to have been a toss-up whether he wouldn't stay there. Old Humphry has been in rather a state of mind about it. Anxious that he should take the plunge or afraid of his taking it—one never can be certain with him. Anyhow, the plunge hasn't been taken. No; I shouldn't say that there was any prospect of Nigel's making it up with Monica Ferrand. That isn't what she wants, and of course it isn't what he wants."

"I believe he does, though," Cuthbert affirmed.

"To believe that you would have to be as blind as Monica and a good deal blinder than that sightless old man at Glen Cottage, who sees everything. However, if you want to hear all about it upon the best authority, you had better ask your friend Miss Dallison. After all, she owes you an explanation."

"She doesn't owe me anything. Is she at Lannowe, then?"

"As if you didn't know that she is!"

"Well, somebody told me that she was expected. I suppose you mean that she was the cause of the rupture."

"It isn't a secret; everybody knows it, except Monica, who is sorry for him—though not to the extent of wishing to be engaged to him again, I fancy. Perhaps some people are sorry for you; but I can't pretend to be one of them. To tell you the truth, I don't like Miss Dallison."

"Nor do I," said Cuthbert quickly.

Miss Bessie coughed.

"I don't!" he repeated; "I never liked her from the first."

"I suppose not; I suppose my only horse didn't have a sore back for six weeks, owing to your having kindly offered her the loan of him when you went out riding together."

"I'm awfully sorry about the sore back," said

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Cuthbert, in genuine concern ; "this is the first I have heard of it. But of course it was you, not I, who offered her the mount, and indeed it was she, not I, who suggested the ride."

"Well, never mind !" returned Bessie magnanimously ; "I'll forgive you everything, so long as you don't ask me to welcome her as a sister-in-law."

"A sister-in-law ?"

"It's the same thing ; I have always included you with the boys in my own mind."

She spoke and looked so kindly that Cuthbert could only thank her for an assurance which did not precisely fill him with gratitude ; but during the remainder of their journey he was unusually silent and absent-minded. That part of it which consisted in the drive from the station to Knaresby was accomplished with considerable difficulty ; for the roads were deep in the snow which was still falling, and more than once Cuthbert had to go to the heads of the floundering horses. At length, however, they stepped out of the cold and darkness into the warm entrance-hall, where the family, assembled in full strength, awaited them.

"You see, Robert," observed Mrs. Scarth placidly, after she had embraced the travellers, "there was no occasion to fuss."

"I am not aware of having fussed," returned her husband. "I certainly did say that the carriage ought not to have been sent out in such weather, and I take leave to maintain my opinion. Of course, as you chose to send it without consulting me, I was naturally anxious to hear of its safe return. I confess I thought that Bessie would have remained where she was, like a reasonable being, and that Cuthbert would have put up for the night at the Station Hotel at York, where he would have been quite comfortable."

"I expect to be a good deal more comfortable at Knaresby, thank you, Uncle Robert," answered his nephew, laughing, "and I am very glad that it didn't occur to us to be reasonable beings; for it strikes me forcibly that this house is in for a week of isolation."

Nothing seemed more likely. The snow continued to fall thickly all through the night, and although by breakfast time the next morning it had ceased and a pale, wintry sun was visible in the southern sky, there was neither sign of thaw nor possibility of clearing the long avenue, the course of which could only be discerned by the bare trees which flanked it on either side.

"Well, we must play pool, that's all," remarked one of the young men resignedly.

So they played pool until they were tired of it; after which somebody suggested a simple but ingenious game called "Cat and Mouse," which consisted in blindfolding two members of the party and setting the one to chase the other round the billiard-table, the rule being that neither should be at liberty to remove his hands from the cushions. This, as was to be anticipated, ended by the Mouse breaking the rule and getting under the table, the subsequent breathless pauses and wild rushes on the part of his pursuer provoking much hilarity amongst the lookers-on. The general scrimmage which ensued, and which quite accorded with the traditions of the house, was not participated in by Cuthbert, who was smoking comfortably, with his feet tucked under him, on one of the long leather benches which surrounded the room, and who confided to his neighbour that he was enjoying himself.

"Between you and me," said he, "I shouldn't care much if it were to go on snowing for another fortnight. It's much jollier being by ourselves, don't you think so?"

"Is it?" asked Bessie. "Wouldn't it be jollier still if Miss Dallison were to be wafted over from Lannowe in a balloon?"

"Most certainly not!" he replied, with much emphasis. "I can't be thankful enough that the problem of aërial navigation remains unsolved."

"Oh, it doesn't follow that, if she had a navigable balloon, she would steer in this direction. She might prefer to shape a course for Rixmouth."

"She would be welcome," Cuthbert declared, encountering his cousin's scrutiny with eyes as clear as his conscience. "Or rather, no; on second thoughts, I shouldn't like her to invade the poor fellow's seclusion. Fortunately, she can't; and another good thing is that nobody can invade ours."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when, owing to a momentary cessation in the hubbub around him, there fell upon his ear a distant sound of tinkling bells, to remind him that other methods exist of dealing with frozen snow than flying above it. He ran to the window, peered out and exclaimed:

"By Jove! here comes old Trenchard in a sleigh!" And then, under his breath, "Now I do wonder what that old rascal is up to. He hasn't had runners put on to his trap in such a hurry for nothing, I'll bet any money!"

Mr. Trenchard, rosy and smiling, made his appearance in the course of a few minutes, and explained that he had not adopted the prompt measure attributed to him. He had had an old sleigh in his coach-house for years, it seemed, and had been unable to resist so fine an occasion of turning it to account.

"Upon my word," said he, "I blush for you young ones, shutting yourselves up in a room reeking with tobacco-smoke on a fine day like this! Didn't I hear

my friend Cuthbert's voice? I thought so. Now I'll tell you what it is, Cuthbert, you must come and lend a hand at sweeping the Rixmouth lake clear. Then we will get up some skating and curling to amuse poor Nigel, who is all alone in his castle. I had thoughts of bringing him over here with me today; but I doubted whether there would be much use in asking him; he is so depressed and averse to meeting his fellow-creatures just now, poor fellow!"

Mr. Trenchard had, of course, come to luncheon, the footing upon which he stood at Knaresby rendering him independent of invitations and always sure of a welcome. He was indeed, by reason of his unflagging cheerfulness and kindly disposition, a pleasant addition to any party, and the young people in the billiard-room felt that it had been both plucky and friendly of him to brave the elements for the sake of paying them a visit.

The same epithets seemed to apply in an even more marked degree to another visitor, who, just after the luncheon-gong had sounded, was seen making his way across the white, undulating expanse of the park on foot. The movements of this solitary black figure were somewhat ungraceful, yet singularly rapid; presently it became manifest that he was walking on snow-shoes, and soon afterwards his identity was revealed to the interested watchers at the window.

"Dear fellow!" exclaimed Mrs. Scarth admiringly; "how nice of him!—and how unexpected, too! I wonder where he learned to skip along like that."

Nigel had acquired the not very difficult art of snow-shoeing in the Engadine during a certain bygone winter vacation. He mentioned this when he was announced, looking a little shy, yet glad to shake hands with his cousins and with Cuthbert, to whom he said, "I had a sort of hope that I should find you here."

Cuthbert wondered whether he had expected to find old Humphry there; he also wondered whether old Humphry was pleased or the reverse by his arrival. But Mr. Trenchard's suave urbanity betrayed nothing, nor was there any ring of insincerity in his exclamation of, "Well done our parish! I think we have shown these good folks here that only lazy and unenterprising persons submit to being snowed-up."

As a matter of fact, Mr. Trenchard, who was at Knaresby for the express purpose of holding a conference with his old friend Robert Scarth upon the subject of his young friend Nigel, was not best pleased. Not only had he things to say which certainly could not be said in Nigel's presence, but he was a little afraid lest the latter should have taken it into his head to seek counsel or guidance from his uncle. Benevolence, like love, is apt to be jealous, and it must be confessed that this warm-hearted and capable old gentleman did not like those whom he had taken under his special protection to admit others into their confidence. Besides, Robert Scarth's many eccentricities and prejudices sufficed to put him out of court as a possible adviser for anybody!

There was, however, no ground for the above apprehension. Nigel, judging by his conversation and demeanour during luncheon, had skimmed across country without other aim than the very natural and pardonable one of escaping from his own company. He was at first visibly embarrassed, visibly doubtful whether he would be received in the character of a black sheep or not; but as soon as he found that his recent aberrations were ignored and that he was treated as if nothing had happened, he gradually became at his ease. It was only the casual mention of Miss Dallison's name by one of the boys that caused him to frown and relapse into

gloomy silence for a time ; his cheerfulness was restored when Mrs. Scarth hospitably said :

"Your snow-shoes, or Mr. Trenchard's sleigh, or something will have to bring you here on Christmas Day, mind. You are not going to be allowed to eat your plum-pudding all by yourself."

He willingly accompanied his cousins to the billiard-room after luncheon ; he displayed no wish to consult his uncle, whose arm old Humphry took, saying :

"Lead me into your den, Robert ; I want to have a word with you."

"I know what you are going to say," Mr. Scarth observed, as soon as he was alone with his old friend ; "you are going to tell me that that bigoted nephew of mine will be back in his cloister presently, unless he is stopped."

"Has he spoken to you about it ?" Mr. Trenchard inquired.

"No ; but he wrote to Linklater, who wrote to me. It seems that he was in some uncertainty as to the stipulations of Tom's preposterous will. Linklater says he made them clear to him—with what result I don't know."

"Oh, they are clear enough. If he were to revert to monasticism now, you would have to appoint somebody, not being either a son of your own or a Romanist, to succeed him in the estates. He himself has no power to nominate his successor during your lifetime."

"Do you believe, Humphry, that he seriously contemplates a step which nothing seems to me to justify ? It is true that he has not shown himself satisfactory either as a landowner or in respect of personal conduct ; still I can't wish him to pauperise himself irrevocably at his age."

"Nobody could wish it, and I most sincerely hope

that this present mood of his will pass. At the same time, it has to be remembered that he is a fanatic and that he has had what I suppose we must call a great disappointment. For my own part, I shall do all I possibly can to convince him that it is his duty to remain where he is. I feel a good deal less sure of success than I should like to feel, though."

"I don't see what *I* can do to bring that conviction home to him," observed Mr. Scarth rather peevishly.

"You can't do very much, I am afraid."

"And who on earth am I to place in possession of my brother's property if this young lunatic throws it upon my hands?"

"Well, I think we can easily find an answer to that question. Your sons being, unfortunately, excluded, it would seem only natural to appoint your nephew."

"What!—Cuthbert Gretton?" cried Mr. Scarth sharply. "I don't agree with you at all. Why Cuthbert, who hasn't a drop of Scarth blood in his veins, rather than anybody else?"

"He is at least your nephew by marriage, and he is a sensible, steady young fellow. Moreover, it has sometimes occurred to me—I don't know whether it has ever occurred to you—that there is a chance of his becoming even more closely connected with your family. Miss Bessie might do better perhaps; but really she might do considerably worse."

Mr. Scarth jumped up and began to pace up and down the room wrathfully. The idea was quite new to him, and it was his nature to oppose all new ideas, tooth and nail.

"I believe you are mistaken," he exclaimed; "but if you are right, all I can say is that nothing would induce me to give my consent! In the first place, I

strongly disapprove of marriages between cousins; secondly, Cuthbert's means are as yet wholly insufficient——"

"But they would become ample if he were the owner of Rixmouth Castle," Mr. Trenchard observed parenthetically.

"Ah, there you are! Now you have given me an absolutely conclusive reason for not nominating him. How could I possibly make such a gift to a man who was, or who aspired to be, my son-in-law? I should be condemned, and properly condemned, by all right-thinking people."

"Well, well," said old Humphry, smiling, "there is never any use in arguing with you, Robert; so I won't argue, although I trust I am a right-thinking person and although, in my opinion, it would be a very natural thing to name your son-in-law. But let us hope that the case will not arise; let us try to hit upon some means of preventing it from arising."

The kindly suggestions which he proceeded to put forward with regard to the treatment of Nigel met with curt, inattentive answers from his friend, whose thoughts had been diverted into another channel.

"I may as well tell you, Humphry," broke in the latter, after a time, "that if I have to exercise the right which Tom so perversely chose to thrust upon me, you are the person whom I shall select as his heir."

Mr. Trenchard, instead of expressing any gratitude, burst out into a hearty laugh. "That's a good joke!" he cried. And then with that marvellous instinct of his for at once detecting a change of countenance on the part of those near him, "No, no, my dear Robert; don't be hurt. I didn't mean to hurt you, and I am quite sure that you mean kindly to me, as you always

do. But really you must forgive me for saying that such a notion as that is at least as perverse as any that ever came into poor Tom's head."

"I take leave to differ," returned Robert. "My feeling is that I am bound, so far as in me lies, to place the estate in capable hands, and I know of none more capable than yours."

"The hands of a blind old man!"

"A man who was blinded by me," answered the other, with a sudden tremor in his harsh voice.

"Ah, Robert, have we been friends for so many years and do you still know me so little! Can't you understand that the worst part of a misfortune to which I have become so habituated that I have almost ceased to regard it as a misfortune has been the knowledge that it has cast a gloom over your life? Can't you see the cruelty of offering to make atonement where you owe none by forcing wealth which I don't covet upon me at the end of my life?"

"You mistake me, indeed you do!" Robert protested. "I express myself badly; I am rough and clumsy and—and perverse, if you like; but I am not a brute. The thought of offering you reparation never entered my mind; I only thought, as I still think, that you are better fitted than anybody else whom I know to follow my brother in the control of a property which he would have mismanaged far worse than he did, but for your advice and help."

"That may be," agreed old Humphry, with a slight shrug of his shoulders, "and it is true that, were I to be put in possession of the property tomorrow, my first act would be to bequeath it to your eldest son. In which queer, roundabout way justice would eventually be done. Nevertheless, I must beg you to dismiss such fantastic ideas, and, at the risk of provoking you, I

must repeat that, in my judgment, you ought to name Cuthbert."

"That," declared Mr. Scarth obstinately, "I shall not do."

Mr. Trenchard sighed. "Then it becomes more than ever incumbent upon me to see to it that Nigel remains where he is. Ah, you Scarths!—you are difficult people to lead and impossible to drive!"

CHAPTER XVI

PACIFICATION

OWING to the inclemency of the weather and other causes—perhaps rather more as a result of other causes than of the inclemency of the weather—Lord Lannowe's family party for Christmas fell through. His married daughters, one and all, wrote to make excuse, and if he suspected that this was because they looked forward to entertaining livelier company in their own houses than he could offer them in his, he was nevertheless not unwilling to excuse them.

"You see," he remarked to Colonel Gervase, who, for his part, had faithfully kept a long-standing engagement, "if Frances and Georgie were to come here now, I am not at all sure that they wouldn't do more harm than good. They tell me plainly that they think it ridiculous of me to have given young Scarth his *congé*, they would certainly do all they could to bring the match on again if they had the chance, and really, with Monnie in her present condition of mind, I wouldn't answer for the consequences of her being hustled."

"What," inquired Gervase, "is Monica's present condition of mind?"

Lord Lannowe shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, she is talking about entering religion again. Nolan says she had better be allowed to talk about it and that she won't do it; I hope he is right, I'm sure. One thing

for which I suppose we ought to be thankful is that she has given the young fellow up quite as readily as she accepted him. What incomprehensible beings women are ! ”

“ I have generally found them so ; but Monica, I think, has a singularly sweet and obedient disposition. Are you sure that she doesn't feel this more than she chooses to show ? ”

“ My dear Ned, she doesn't care a button for the man ! It isn't her submission that astonishes me, it's her ever having accepted him.” Lord Lannowe added quite gravely, after a moment of meditation, “ She must take after her mother and her sisters, I suppose.”

Gervase hoped not, but made no rejoinder. Monica was a little saint ; yet it was, after all, possible that she resembled the other ladies of her family, who were all of them amiably heartless. Our characters are born with us, and we are not more answerable for them than we are for our features. He said presently :

“ The man is really a bad lot, I presume ? ”

“ Well, I hardly know ; perhaps not. But what I heard of his goings-on in London left me no alternative. Besides which, I must frankly confess that I never fancied the match and that I was not sorry to shunt him. He wrote me a very decent letter ; I may be wrong, but my impression is that he was not altogether sorry to be shunted.”

Lord Lannowe and his guest were walking briskly across the snow-covered park towards the lake, which, like that at Rixmouth, was in process of being swept for skaters. The storm had now quite passed away, the sun was shining brightly in a clear sky and, although it was freezing harder than ever, the air was pleasant and exhilarating.

“ If this goes on,” Lord Lannowe remarked, “ we

shall have to improvise sleighs, like Trenchard, who has been careering all over the place on runners for the last three days, I hear. We shall see him on skates next, no doubt. Hullo !—talk of the devil !”

But it was not Mr. Trenchard who now came swiftly and noiselessly within their ken, behind a pair of fine chestnuts, and Gervase, on recognising the new-comer, exclaimed, with pardonable surprise :

“ Well, this is an unexpected visitor ! Or did you, by any chance, expect him ? ”

“ No ; I didn’t,” answered Lord Lannowe ; “ but I am glad he has come. Best to get the awkwardness of the first meeting over and have done with it, you know. I call this friendly of him.”

Gervase thought it uncommonly impudent of him ; but there he was hardly fair to Nigel, whose motives for paying a call which he dreaded extremely were very far removed from impudence. He was, indeed, so palpably nervous and at a loss for words when he pulled up his horses, in obedience to Lord Lannowe’s hail, that it was impossible to help pitying him.

“ You gave me to understand that I might call,” he began hesitatingly and with a want of tact which was in itself disarming.

“ Only too delighted ! ” briskly replied Lord Lannowe, who for his part was not easily put out of countenance and who in the course of his life had had to deal with many a situation far more embarrassing than this. “ I am afraid you won’t find the young ladies at home, though ; we are on our way to join them down at the lake. Won’t you walk with us and send your horses on to the stables ? A beautiful pair they are too ! Surely I haven’t seen them before, have I ? ”

“ Mr. Trenchard got them for me,” said Nigel. “ He is a good judge of a horse, I believe.”

"Of what isn't that amazing old man a judge! I was just saying to Gervase that nothing would surprise me less than to see him cutting figures on the ice. We shall hardly get the lake into proper condition without flooding it, though, I imagine. Come along and give us the benefit of your advice."

Protected by Lord Lannowe's kindly loquacity, for which he was sincerely grateful, Nigel tramped over the crisp, frozen snow without perpetrating further solecisms until the spot was reached whence Monica and Ethel Dallison were inspecting a party of busy sweepers. Monica, on catching sight of him, coloured up and glanced anxiously at her father, as if appealing for guidance; but, obtaining none, she timidly held out her hand, which Nigel took. Then, after one moment of somewhat disconcerting silence—for neither of the young people could think of a word to say—Colonel Gervase came to the rescue with some commonplace remark, and Nigel, as in courtesy bound, turned to accost Miss Dallison. It was typical of the man that, during a drive upon which he had set forth with no small trepidation, he had thought very little about the awkwardness of meeting his former *fiancée* once more; what he had had in his mind was to put himself to the test, which he felt that it would never do to skirk, of facing Ethel Dallison. He wanted to be convinced that he could do so safely, and most satisfactory it was to him to find that he could. For he perceived in an instant that the arts by means of which it had pleased her to fascinate him were not to be renewed. There was, of course, no longer any need for them to be employed, seeing that, by reason of his imbecility, they had achieved their purpose with such ridiculous ease. Her eyes, once so disturbing, now expressed no more than the moderate pleasure with which it is natural to greet an acquaintance; but he

flattered himself that even if they had resumed their former fires, they would have left him cold. She had tried to ruin him, body and soul, he said to himself in his exaggerated way, and in that aim at least she had failed, while her success in bringing his engagement to an end was one for which he could forgive her. In a word, she was no more to him than he was to her; so far as he was concerned, she had become what Monsignor Nolan had called her, an extinct volcano. Volcanoes which have ceased to be active may be contemplated with a shudder perhaps, but no longer with alarm.

Miss Dallison's behaviour was in no way alarming. She talked pleasantly and indifferently for a minute or two about the condition of the ice, commiserated the disappointed fox-hunters and mentioned that the cold was even more severe in Paris than in England; after which she struck into Monica's conversation with Colonel Gervase by some allusion to skating in the Bois de Boulogne, and so left Nigel to be entertained by Lord Lannowe.

"Handsome girl, that," remarked his lordship innocently. "Pity somebody doesn't marry her."

"Perhaps somebody will," said Nigel.

"Oh, no doubt; but I mean some gentleman. I am afraid, from what Gervase tells me, that she doesn't mix with a particularly nice lot of people in Paris. Her father, unfortunately, is not quite all that could be wished."

"An irreclaimable blackguard!" exclaimed Nigel, with retrospective disgust.

"Eh? Do you know the man?"

"I believe he drinks," answered Nigel evasively, adding after a moment, "Not that it becomes me to call any fellow-creature a blackguard."

Lord Lannowe frowned; for he thought that sort of

thing in bad taste. The young man had chosen to conduct himself after a fashion which could not be tolerated ; but he had apparently seen the error of his ways and meant to turn over a new leaf. Whether such was his intention or not, there was an end of him as a candidate for Monica's hand, and allusions to what had recently occurred were therefore gratuitous and disagreeable. This point of view poor Nigel, who was genuinely contrite, and who thought he ought to display some contrition, failed to realise. Consequently, in the course of the next quarter of an hour he went near to wearing out the old gentleman's patience by recurrent hints at a subject which the other resolutely declined to discuss. When a move was made towards the house, Lord Lannowe, who had had more than enough of him, caught Gervase by the arm, and thus it came about that Nigel presently found himself walking with Miss Dallison, while the other three marched on in advance.

She surprised him by asking in an almost humble tone of voice, "Is it peace?"

"I hope so," he replied coldly. "Why not?"

"We did not part upon very friendly terms, if you remember ; but perhaps that was as much my fault as yours. I was flippant and offensive, I admit ; I wonder whether you will admit that I had some provocation."

"Provocation?"

"You said and implied several things which were scarcely flattering ; but never mind ; you did not mean them for insults perhaps. One consolation is that the worse you think of me the more you must wish me to be received into what you consider the only true Church. You would not refuse help in that direction to your worst enemy, would you?"

"Of course not," answered Nigel stiffly; "I shall be very glad to be of help to you if I can, and if you are sincere in asking for it."

It did not take her very long to convince him that she was sincere. There was no inherent improbability about the desire which she proclaimed to be under guidance and authority; he had experienced precisely the same craving himself, and had felt, just as she professed to do, that he must either be a Catholic or a castaway. Moreover, his heart became softened towards her when she pleaded that she was what her education and training had made her.

"You have had a glimpse of my home life; you can guess its unavoidable results, I daresay. You set me down, I know, as a heartless, selfish, scheming woman. I am not quite that; still I am bad enough to have many inclinations that I ought not to have, and good enough to be frightened of myself."

He nodded. "Yes, I know; I have been through it all. When these calls come to us we can only neglect them at our eternal peril. Yet—what more can I say to you than I have said already? You should consult Monsignor Nolan, I think."

"Perhaps I will; but I wanted to make my peace with you first, if I could. You seem to be under the impression that I brought about a separation between you and Monica——"

"I certainly am under that impression," he interjected.

"Then won't you ask yourself whether I should have done you any serious injury if I had? She accepted you because she thought her people wanted her to accept you, and you proposed to her because you thought you ought to marry somebody; you are both of you glad in your hearts to be free again.

Unless that were so, what possible chance of success could my interference, such as it was, have had?"

"I acknowledge that I myself was principally to blame," said Nigel; "still it is not unnatural for a man who has been duped and laughed at to feel a little sore."

"By whom have you been laughed at?" she asked. "Not by me, at all events. There has been more crying than laughing over the whole business on my side, I can assure you."

For the first time since they had been stepping along, side by side, he turned his head and looked at her. What he saw was a lovely, troubled countenance, with a certain expression of tenderness about the mouth and eyes which set his heart beating. Was he upon the verge of being duped once more? That was the question which he instinctively put to himself, and, as though to disclaim an unmerited suspicion, she at once quickened her pace.

"You don't trust me," said she, in a lowered voice, just before they caught up the trio in front of them, "and I don't wonder; but—may we not be friends?"

He made a sign of assent. Strange notions were fermenting in his brain; he wanted to get away and examine them by himself; he declined almost curtly Lord Lannowe's urbane invitation to come into the house and have a cup of tea. Soon he was seated in his sleigh again, flying over the hard snow behind the fast-trotting horses. Was the exhilaration of which he was conscious the result of rapid motion and keen air alone? He might have thought so, had he been less addicted to that scrutiny of himself, his moods and his feelings against which Cuthbert had taken the liberty of cautioning him; but, being what he was, he had to recognise that he was glad because he had been enabled

to modify his opinion of Ethel Dallison. He had undoubtedly misjudged her ; perhaps she was even justified in accusing him of having insulted her. Her motives for causing a breach between him and Monica, (she had virtually pleaded guilty to that indictment), had not been so wanton and cynical as he had assumed. But what, in addition to the wish, for which he gave her credit, to release her friend from an ill-considered pledge, had her motives really been ? There was an obvious explanation—true or untrue—and at the thought of it his heart began to thump against his ribs again. If, after all, she should be guided into embracing the true faith, a very different complexion would be put upon ideas which had hitherto appeared fantastic, sinful, impossible. Never from the outset had he felt certain whether he loved or hated Ethel Dallison ; but then he had never really known her until now. Such was the conclusion at which he seriously arrived, and his ready adoption of it gives, it must be owned, the measure of his gullibility. All that can be said for him is that the best people in the world are the most easily deceived.

Something of the sort was said to him, within a quarter of an hour, by that astute student of mankind Humphry Trenchard ; for on his homeward road he could not withstand an impulse to turn aside at Glen Cottage and confess what he had been about. Old Humphry, who had also been out for a drive and who was now toasting his toes comfortably before a fire of blazing logs, heard him out without interruption and, when he had made an end of speaking, remarked half-laughingly, half-sorrowfully :

“ My poor Nigel, simple, loyal natures like yours are the salt of the earth ; yet you make me doubt at times whether you would not be more at home in the cloister

than in this rough world. To call at Lannowe was very well; to establish a *modus vivendi* with those good people, whom you are bound to meet at every turn and with whom strained relations would be most uncomfortable, was still better; but to let yourself be talked over by Miss Dallison was—what can I call it without affronting you?”

“Call it anything you like,” said Nigel.

“Then I will make so bold as to call it ingenuous of you. You actually believe, then, that she wishes to be received into the Church of Rome?”

“Yes, that is my belief. There would be nothing extraordinary in her having such a wish.”

“I agree with you that her wish would not be extraordinary if your uncle’s will had not been so extraordinary; but I don’t seem to see Miss Dallison becoming a Roman Catholic with the knowledge that she would *ipso facto* disinherit her children.”

“Her children?”

“My dear boy, we are all by ourselves, so why should we waste time in seeking synonyms for spades? The plain truth is that you would like to make her your wife. Now isn’t that the plain truth?”

“I don’t know,” was Nigel’s truthful reply.

“Then I know—which for purposes of argument will do as well, perhaps. I am not equally sure that she would like to have you for her husband, although what you have been telling me seems to point that way; but I am positive that, if she intends to marry you, she will take care that marriage shall precede conversion.”

“That would be a total impossibility,” said Nigel.

“Would it? I should hesitate myself to use the word impossibility where women are concerned, and she is a clever woman. You will say, no doubt, that I am a suspicious, evil-minded old man.”

"No ; only I don't think you quite realise what religion means to us."

"If I don't," returned Mr. Trenchard, with a shrug of his shoulders and a smile, "it is not for want of having received some object lessons from you. I realise, for instance, that you are at least as much in love with the Order of Saint Benedict as you are with Miss Dallison, and for the life of me I can't say which of the two attachments strikes me as the more deplorable ! Must it be the one or the other ? "

"I don't know," answered Nigel for the second time.

"And so you come to me—of all helpless people !—for a hint. Suppose I were to say, let it be neither ? "

"I want to do my duty," Nigel declared, after a pause.

"I am sure you do, my dear fellow, and I want to do mine. That is why I have two earnest entreaties to make of you. Firstly, don't be inveigled into marrying a Protestant."

"I have told you already that such a thing could not happen. I will promise, if you like, never to do such a thing."

"Secondly, don't break my heart by burying yourself in a monastery. You can't need to be told how fond I am of you personally, Nigel, and you may have guessed that I have a sort of paternal fondness for the estate, which you have allowed me to give you some little assistance in managing. I couldn't bear to see it pass into the hands of a stranger now, and you are aware that your uncle is debarred from handing it over to one of his own family."

"I am afraid," said Nigel, "that I cannot make any definite promise as to that ; I can only repeat that I wish to do my duty." He added, after a rather long interval of silence, "You are mistaken about Miss Dallison."

"Let us hope so," returned old Humphry drily.

CHAPTER XVII

A FAIR AFTERNOON'S WORK

ONE of those sudden, inexplicable thaws which put weather-prophets out of countenance occurred during the night that followed Nigel's visit to Lannowe and, accompanied by a deluge of rain, made short work of snow and ice. There was joy in many a country house the next morning, and nowhere more than at Knaresby, where hunting was in far greater favour than skating or sleighing. It is true that Mr. Scarth, ever a pessimist, refused to associate himself with the cheerful anticipations of the young people. He tapped the barometer, which had indeed dropped considerably, but which now remained stationary, looked out of the window, shook his head and said :

"This is not a true change ; we shall have the frost back worse than ever before sunset, you'll see. I am sorry for you, Cuthbert, but you may as well make up your mind that no foxes will be broken up in your presence until next season."

Cuthbert was not particularly sorry for himself. He would have liked, of course, to have a few days with the hounds, but he had discovered that he liked a few days with Bessie still better, and he could not but notice that since he had made certain observations to her respecting Miss Dallison Bessie had become much more like her old friendly self. Whether friendliness was all that he

asked of her might be another question ; but it was at least better than sarcasm—a weapon which, without special disparagement of Miss Scarth, may be said to be generally ill-adapted for feminine manipulation.

What was from various points of view a little unfortunate was that Ethel, tempted by the disappearance of the snow, walked in soon after luncheon, having tramped all the way from Lannowe, as she proudly announced, to shake hands with her friends at Knaresby. She was entitled to call them her friends ; for an intimacy had sprung up between her and them during the summer, and notes had been exchanged since her return to Yorkshire, and if two members of the party were not precisely overjoyed to see her, they had the good manners to disguise their feelings. One of them, perhaps, may even have disguised his feelings a shade too well to give complete satisfaction to the other. It is so difficult to give satisfaction all round !

Miss Dallison, it seemed, had found none in looking on at the preparations for the coming festival with which her entertainers at Lannowe were occupied.

"They are decorating the chapel and setting up a *crèche*, with life-size figures round it, and I don't know what else," she said. "They wouldn't allow me to help—it would have been a sort of desecration if I had, I suppose—and they evidently didn't want me ; so I said I should walk over here."

"Where I hope you know that you are always wanted, my dear," said good-natured Mrs. Scarth. "They ought not to have let you trudge through the mud and slush, though. One of the boys will drive you back—or perhaps Cuthbert would like to offer his services."

Cuthbert could do no less than make response to an appeal so direct. He did not do much more ; yet his

few words of obligatory politeness appeared to displease Miss Bessie, who presently remarked :

"Well, although it doesn't run to a *crèche* in our humble little country church, we do go in rather heavily for evergreen ropes and cotton-wool texts ; so, as I have got to go and take measurements, not to speak of lending a hand in the construction of the garlands, I am afraid I must be off. Come along, all of you, and make yourselves useful, please. Oh, not you, Cuthbert ; you're booked already."

"Miss Dallison might like to compare Anglican with Roman ornamentation," Cuthbert ventured to suggest.

But Miss Dallison only smiled, while Mrs. Scarth answered for her : "I am sure she feels no curiosity upon the subject, and if she does, she can come over on Christmas Day—in fact, we shall insist upon her coming—to admire the finished work. Stay and have a quiet chat with me, my dear ; you must be dead tired after your long walk."

Bessie and her brothers soon departed, the former disregarding a glance of entreaty from Cuthbert, with whom, indeed, Ethel had begun to converse in an undertone and who had the air of accepting his fate with tolerable equanimity. Inwardly, however, he was determined not to accept it ; nor, as it happened, was either of the ladies with whom he was left, eager to detain him. His aunt wanted to have a private talk with her visitor, and Ethel did not care about trialogues ; so no remark was made when, at the end of five minutes or so, he got up, strolled across to the window, stood there for a moment, with his hands in his pockets, and then quietly left the room.

"And now, my dear," Mrs. Scarth began at once, "do tell me about poor Nigel !"

"Can I tell you anything about him that you don't know?" asked Ethel, with a smile.

"As far as I can make out, you are the only person who knows the real truth. Cuthbert may; but he is so reticent. Of course what everybody knows is that, after he had rushed off abroad like that, without rhyme or reason, he betook himself to London and plunged into a sort of deliberate dissipation, which one can only suppose was intended to disgust Lord Lannowe and Monica. Then the next thing we hear is that his engagement is off and that he has bolted down to his Abbey—to do penance, I presume. Well, the key to the riddle doesn't seem very far to seek."

"Doesn't it?"

"Oh, I am not asking you to tell me anything that you would rather not tell, my dear," Mrs. Scarth declared; "only it was plain to anybody who had eyes that he admired you very much last autumn, and I want just to say how glad I should be if you and he could come to an understanding. The priests probably wouldn't allow him to marry a heretic, and you perhaps would not like to marry a Roman."

Mrs. Scarth paused interrogatively, but, receiving no reply, went on: "Still, there always remains the possibility of his returning to the Church in which he was born and bred, which would be in every way so much the best solution!"

At this Ethel could not help laughing. "I think you may take it for granted that he will not do that," she said.

"Ah, one never knows; young men when they are in love will do the oddest things! I remember, some years ago, an under-gardener of ours going quite crazy about one of the housemaids, who was a strict Baptist and wouldn't look at him unless he consented to be

soused in the canal. So in he went, though it was bitterly cold weather at the time, and through some mistake or other his head slipped under water and he was as nearly as possible drowned. Then there was a great piece of work to restore animation, and stimulants were employed so freely that the poor fellow became hopelessly intoxicated and said things which the girl declared she could neither forget nor forgive. So she didn't marry him, after all, and he returned to the Church, and he told me in confidence that he was not sorry. He said he had had enough of sects to last him his life. Of course," added Mrs. Scarth, realising perhaps that the above anecdote, however apposite, was not altogether encouraging, "I don't mention him as a model, only as an instance of what men are."

"Your nephew," observed Ethel, "is not that sort of man."

"Are you sure he isn't? I may be wrong, but I should almost have thought that he was. Would it be a very great piece of impertinence to ask—strictly between ourselves—whether you have refused him or not?"

"He has never given me the chance," answered Ethel.

After a moment of reflection, she judged it prudent and advisable to state that he had called upon her parents in Paris in the autumn. "But he was still engaged to Monica then."

"I quite understand; you very properly gave him no encouragement under the circumstances, and—what followed followed. Yes; it is all pretty much as I thought; you sent him away in despair, no doubt. But I don't despair; I still cling to my hopes."

"It seems to me very odd that you should have such hopes," remarked Ethel, to whom it did in truth seem odd.

"You wouldn't think it so if you took in the situation. There is a real danger, you see, of Nigel's throwing up everything and converting himself into a monk for good and all. Then it would devolve upon my husband to name somebody as his successor, and, since Robert is not at liberty to appoint himself or one of his children, it would be necessary to go outside the family. Naturally, we should not like that."

"I see," answered Ethel. "At the same time, your nephew's wishes would have to be taken into account, wouldn't they?—and even perhaps mine."

"Oh, of course. Only it would be so nice of you both if you wished to do the sensible thing, and the more I think of it the more I can't imagine any reason why you shouldn't!"

Ethel made no immediate reply; but, after a short spell of silence, "To whom would Mr. Scarth hand over the property, if he had to hand it over to somebody, I wonder," she said, with languid curiosity.

"I wish I knew! To Cuthbert, I hope; but one never dares to make suggestions to Robert, except when one is particularly anxious that he should not adopt them. I am sure, at any rate, that he can't want to be placed in such an uncomfortable, invidious position, and I have a very strong idea that you could deliver him from it if you would."

So had Ethel; but she was not disposed to commit herself in any degree, and she was meditating the introduction of some less delicate topic when the butler came to her aid by throwing open the door and announcing "Mr. Nigel Scarth."

Nigel shook hands with the two ladies, the elder of whom placidly remarked, "We were just talking about you, my dear boy."

"Were you?" he returned, frowning slightly.

"Would it be bad manners to inquire what you were saying?"

He addressed the question to his aunt; but it was Ethel who answered: "We were saying how much we hoped that you were not going to return to a monastery."

"Has anybody been telling you that I contemplate doing so? I hear from Monsignor Nolan that there has been a report to that effect in the neighbourhood—the result, I suppose, of my having spent a few days at Lew Abbey on my way home. You may state, on my authority, that there is no foundation for it."

"So much the better!" cried Mrs. Scarth.

"Have you seen Monsignor Nolan today?" Ethel inquired.

He answered, with a perceptible softening of face and voice, "Yes, I have just come from Lannowe, where I found them very busy in the chapel. They told me you were here."

At this she smiled, for she was not displeased by his virtually acknowledged pursuit of her; but her smile faded when he went on:

"Monsignor said he had lent you some books which I am sure will interest you, though certain passages may seem a little difficult to you at first. But you will soon find your feet; it is wonderful how soon one begins——"

She cut him short, not considering the moment at all a suitable one for the discussion of those works of devotion.

"Do you think it is going to freeze again?" she asked.

"Oh, it is freezing already," was his reply. "Fortunately, my horses are roughed; so I shall be able to drive you back to Lannowe in safely presently, if you will honour me so far as to accept a lift."

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Ethel thanked him, but said that she believed Mr. Gretton proposed to render her that service, an announcement which was evidently not to Nigel's liking. He had, however, an ally in his aunt, who said, after a time :

"My dear Ethel, I needn't tell you that I don't want you to hurry away ; but the days are so short now that we shall have the darkness upon us in another quarter of an hour, and really I don't think it would be safe to count upon Cuthbert, who has most likely gone down to join the others at the church. If I were you, I should accept Nigel's offer, instead of waiting."

If Ethel wanted to wait for Cuthbert—and the chances are that she did—she was likewise aware that there are occasions upon which it is wise and advisable not to do what one wants. Moreover, she did not, strange to say, scent a possible rival in Bessie. It is the Nemesis of the ever victorious to disbelieve in serious antagonism. A few minutes later, therefore, she was seated in Nigel's four-wheeled dogcart and was bowling down the avenue at a rate of speed which very soon had to be reduced. For the return of the frost, converting the thawed surface of the roads into a sheet of ice, had rendered them well-nigh impassable and Nigel had his work cut out to keep his high-couraged chesnuts upon their legs.

"I was so glad to hear that you had spoken to Monsignor Nolan," he began, but had to leave his sentence unfinished, owing to the swerving of the near horse, who missed his footing and was within an ace of coming down.

"Well, you told me to speak to him," Ethel remarked, "Don't jump to conclusions, though ; I haven't got a step beyond consulting him yet."

"So he told me. Still it is the first step that costs—and counts. Each successive one will be easier, and

soon you will be astonished at yourself for having so long refused what is open to all the world."

She would be greatly astonished at herself, she thought, were she to seek admission into the Roman communion and even more astonished if she should decide to act in the sense suggested by Mrs. Scarth. Nevertheless, she had it in her to do strange things, and so perhaps had this impulsive fellow-creature by her side, who would doubtless be ready to die for his religion, yet who had shown himself capable, when crossed, of breaking loose from its precepts and defying its priests. And Rixmouth was a fine property.

"I am afraid I shall try your patience," said she pensively.

He assured her with much earnestness that his patience was inexhaustible. "I have been through it all; I know exactly why and where one hesitates; but at a given moment all hesitation vanishes. Only persevere!"

The colloquy was carried on under drawbacks, of which the close proximity of the groom was one. Another was the increasing difficulty of negotiating, in a bad light, the many pitfalls of the way. The horses, chilled and nervous, were youngish and unaccustomed to conditions which called for some co-operation on their part; the zigzag course which Nigel was bound to steer caused the carriage more than once to slew round after a fashion that added to their discomfort; it was evident that they needed quite as much attention as he could spare from the equally delicate task of proselytising.

"We shall have an upset presently, shan't we?" asked Ethel, who, to do her justice, was seldom frightened, and to whom the embarrassments of her charioteer were not wholly unwelcome. For she herself

was conscious of some inward embarrassment and wished to say as little as possible.

"Oh, dear, no!" he answered, "I think I can promise not to upset you. It is rather bad travelling just here; but when once we are safely at the bottom of this hill we shall have level ground all the rest of the way."

They would no doubt have reached the bottom of the hill, which was not a very steep one, in safety if the near horse had not inopportunately taken it into his head to shy at a white gate. His hind-legs slipped from under him, he struggled vainly to recover himself, and down he came on his side, dragging his companion down also. The groom clutched Nigel just in time to save him from what might have been a very awkward fall, and in an instant all three occupants of the vehicle were down on the road, endeavouring to quiet and disengage the terrified horses. Miss Dallison won golden opinions from the groom by her presence of mind and helpfulness; perhaps she would also have won his master's admiration, had she not already possessed it. Yet, when the trembling, sweating animals had been got on to their legs again, she made a remark which neither master nor groom could feel to be quite admirable.

"What a pity!" she exclaimed. "Will this take a lot off their value, do you think?"

It was sure to take something, for both of them, unfortunately, had been kicked; still their injuries were not so severe, Nigel said, after all available handkerchiefs had been called into requisition, but that they would be able to get home at a foot's pace. He was afraid, however, that Miss Dallison would have to walk the remainder of the way to Lannowe.

"It's no distance now," he added; "we can do it in less than a quarter of an hour by cutting across the fields."

"'We?'" she repeated. "Oh, but you are not coming with me, please. Have you found out so much about me, and do you still remain in ignorance of the fact that I am perfectly competent to take care of myself?"

He should, at any rate, have been aware that he himself could lay no claim to a similar capability; yet he insisted. This unforeseen mishap had furnished him with an opportunity which he did not mean to lose, and although Ethel, for reasons of her own, was really anxious to dismiss him, she was compelled to give in by his peremptorily ordering the groom away. Nor, after they had set out for Lannowe, of which the twinkling lights were already discernible in the distance, did loquacity on her part avail for more than a few minutes to restrain him from saying what he had made up his mind to say.

"I want to beg your pardon," he began, "for having done you an injustice. I believe now that you sincerely wish to be a Catholic, and I believe you are sincerely fond of Monica. In a certain sense you treated me badly—yes; but I do not complain of that, for you rendered me, as well as her, a great service. We could never have been happy together. I fancied that it might be possible; but I was wrong. If I am to marry at all, I must marry a woman whom I love."

"It sounds like a good plan," Ethel dispassionately observed; "but it doesn't always succeed, you know, and in countries where another plan is the rule, excellent results often seem to follow. You will be coming over here for Mass on Christmas Day, will you not?"

But he was not to be put off like that. He stood still, laid his hand on her wrist and broke out fiercely, "You know that I love you!"

Thus brought to bay, she was quick with her return thrust. "I do not," she answered; "I know—since you force me to speak of it—that you had a feeling for me last autumn which I would rather not call love——"

"And which you provoked," he interjected.

"Yes; I provoked it for Monica's sake; you don't complain of that, you tell me. I can't say that I look back upon it with much pride, and I can't think that if it had been what you call it, you would immediately have behaved as you did in London."

"I was mad then," Nigel declared, hanging his head.

"Are you sure that you are quite sane now? Of course your conduct would be no business of mine if you didn't choose to make it so; but you must allow that, after all that has happened, I am entitled to some doubts and misgivings."

She was not at all more entitled to them than he was; but for the moment he felt none, while the very fact of her using such language filled him with a wild hope.

"I fully admit that," he made humble reply; "I only ask you to believe that I love you."

She thought it highly probable that he did; but, had she acknowledged as much, he would have been sure to ask for something further, and this would not have suited her; so she gave him to understand that she must have proof more convincing than mere words. After which, she quickened her pace and turned a deaf ear to his asseverations and promises, although not one of them escaped her.

When he had left her and she was safely in the entrance-hall at Lannowe again, she said to herself that she had done a very fair afternoon's work. The refusal of Rixmouth was, in any case, now assured to her, and

if that was not exactly what she wanted, neither was it a thing to be despised. She had, in fact, been at some pains to secure it, and she did not regret the trouble that she had taken. Only she was a little afraid that Monsignor Nolan, for all his courtesy, amiability and sympathy, saw through her.

CHAPTER XVIII

CHRISTMAS AT KNARESBY

IT was Mrs. Scarth who proposed that Ethel Dallison should be asked to dine and sleep at Knaresby on Christmas Day. It had been arranged that she should, in any case, come over early, so as to enjoy the privileges afforded by the Established Church, and Mrs. Scarth thought that, as there was no house-party at Lannowe, she could very well be spared by her friends there until the following morning. Bessie was unable to follow her mother's reasoning and (being ignorant of the good lady's benevolent scheme for Nigel's future) saw no particular object in such insistent hospitality. Her only remark, however, was that Lord Lannowe and Monica would probably think the invitation to their guest rather an odd one. It must be assumed that they either did not think so or knew how to disguise their feelings; for the invitation was accepted and almost the first thing that Ethel said after her arrival was:

"It is so good of you to have me, and I don't feel that I am behaving rudely or ungratefully to my kind host and hostess by leaving them. I am sure they are really glad to be free from heretical intrusion today."

Somebody at Knaresby—Cuthbert Gretton, to wit—would have been glad enough to be free from the intrusion of Miss Dallison. This was ungallant of him, considering what his dispositions had been in the earlier

part of the year which was drawing towards a close, yet pardonable, in consideration of what they now were. From the moment that she joined herself to him, walking down to church, and was rather unnecessarily and ostentatiously left in sole possession of her companion by the rest of the large party, he foresaw that his Christmas was hardly likely to be a happy one. Not that he found her society disagreeable in itself—she was, on the contrary, more charming than he had ever known her before—only he was uncomfortably conscious of looking as though he wished to monopolise it, which was very far indeed from being the case. And then Bessie was neither as kind nor as generous as everybody ought to be on the 25th of December. On her way to Divine service and on her return from the same she took care to surround herself by an inexpugnable phalanx of brethren, to some of whom she made occasional remarks which caused them to laugh and wink in an unmannerly fashion; she ignored pleading looks which she could not have helped seeing, and during luncheon—which meal was a sort of premature dinner and occupied a long time—she appeared to be simply oblivious of her cousin's existence. She was in high spirits, too, and that rendered her general behaviour the more unfeeling.

In the afternoon everybody went down to the lake to skate. The Knaresby stretch of ornamental water could not compare in point of area with those at Rixmouth and Lannowe; still the effect of the thaw had been to provide a sufficiency of excellent ice for the exploits of so skilled a performer as Miss Dallison, who had brought her skates with her, proved herself to be. She was so far superior to all competitors that they did not, after the first few minutes, even attempt to vie with her, but were contented to watch and applaud her graceful evolutions; had it been her wish to put Miss Bessie's

nose out of joint, her success would have been complete. But in truth she was as exempt from such an ignoble desire as she was from jealousy of one so obviously unfitted to compete with her in any field. What she did realise, with unwonted discomfiture and with a tightness about the region of the heart which she had perhaps never before felt in her life, was that she was failing, for some reason or other, to fascinate the man upon whom she was bringing her fascinations to bear. He was civil, he was attentive, he paid her all the compliments that were her due; but he was not at all what he had been in Paris, nor even what he had been during the summer, and she wondered why. As the simplest and most direct means of finding out, she ended by asking him.

"You don't seem to be quite yourself today," she remarked. "Is anything the matter? Have I, for instance, been so unfortunate as to rub you the wrong way?"

At the moment when this question was put they were alone, a game of hockey having been started by the boys in which Bessie was taking part, but which they had not been invited to join. Cuthbert, withdrawing a wistful eye from the scrimmage, replied, with a touch of irritability:

"Oh, no, of course not. I am sorry that I strike you as being out of sorts; but it's rather a mistake to eat plum-pudding in the middle of the day, don't you think so?"

She looked at the magnificently healthy specimen of humanity beside her and returned, "You might eat anything you liked, or didn't like, at any hour of the day or night and be none the worse. And you *are* displeased with me about something, though you don't choose to say so. Won't you tell me what it is?"

He jerked up his broad shoulders. "Oh, well," he answered, "if it comes to that, Nigel Scarth is a friend of mine, you know."

"I think I might almost venture to say that he is a friend of mine also, and that I have behaved like a friend to him."

"Ah, that remains to be seen! Personally, I am all for playing the game, and it doesn't appear to me that you have played it, Miss Dallison; though of course you may have meant well. Not that it is any business of mine; only you asked me."

Ethel was pleased and reassured by this rejoinder, which seemed to point to a very natural explanation of her companion's being neither the one nor the other.

"Do you remember," she asked gently, "the first evening that we met at the Whartons' dance, and my telling you that I liked Englishmen?"

"Quite well."

"That was another way of saying that I liked you; for you personify the best type of Englishmen. And do you remember a little talk that we had in the garden at Lannowe just before your friend went abroad?"

"Yes I remember that, too."

"Well, I like Englishmen of your sort because you 'go straight,' as you call it, and 'play the game'; but what spoils you a little, I think, is that you are too opinionated and that you make no allowance for people whose standard has to be rather less simple and rigid than yours. Women, unfortunately, can't always go straight and play the game."

"I don't see why they shouldn't."

"No, you don't see why they shouldn't; that is just what I complain of. You were angry with me, and I suppose you are still, for opening your friend's eyes and Monica's in the only way in which it was possible to

open them ; yet, if you will think of it, I could have had no selfish ends to serve by acting as I did."

Although this hardly struck Cuthbert in the light of a self-evident proposition, he did not like to say so. For the rest, his attention was diverted at that moment by a brilliant performance on the part of Bessie, who, sweeping one of her younger brothers off his legs, scored the first goal for her side. He joined from afar in the applause which hailed her triumph and then turned once more to his neighbour.

"Oh, I daresay it will all come right in the end," he said. "I am sorry for Nigel ; but I don't, of course, deny that he has brought his misfortunes upon himself."

"I wonder," she returned, "what you call his misfortunes ! I wonder whether you have taken it into your head that any further misfortunes, hatched by me, are in store for him !"

Cuthbert scanned her beautiful face, which just then wore a somewhat pathetic expression, dubiously. She might have an eye upon Rixmouth or she might not ; he could not tell, and therefore held his peace.

"Because," she quietly resumed, "I don't want *you* to think that. Other people may think what they please ; but I should like to retain your good opinion, if I could."

She did not perceive that she had lost it, and something else into the bargain—something which, when once lost, never is and never has been regained in a world peopled by beings who have several unvarying characteristics in common. She did not even perceive what stared her in the face when Cuthbert acknowledged her compliment by saying, in hurried, embarrassed accents :

"I don't suppose you wish to bring misfortune upon the poor fellow ; why should you ? Hadn't we better

move about a little? You must be getting awfully cold, standing here."

No one is so remorselessly cruel as a disillusioned lover, nor perhaps is anyone quite so obstinately stupid as a woman who has ceased to inspire the passion which she has not ceased to return. It is true that Cuthbert had at no time been absolutely in love with Ethel Dallison; still he had at one time been very near it, and probably he could not forgive her for that. In any case, he was extremely anxious to bring their interview to a close; so much so that she, who was equally anxious to prolong it, was presently obliged to skate down the lake with him and join Mr. and Mrs. Scarth, who were watching the scene from the bank. He edged away from her immediately, leaving upon her mind the impression that he was angry, jealous and suspicious. Had she been asked, or had she asked herself, why he should not be merely indifferent, she would have answered "Because that is impossible." Her experience of mankind, which, young though she was, had been tolerably wide and enlightening, might have justified such a reply.

As for Cuthbert, he made a bold attempt to thrust himself in amongst the hockey-players, who fell upon him with one consent and vociferously expelled him. However, if he was precluded from lending Bessie's side the help of his powerful arm, he at least contrived to place the whole crowd between him and Miss Dallison, which he hoped might be accounted to him for righteousness. That it was not so accounted, and that he was at liberty to devote himself to Miss Dallison as much and for as long as he pleased, was the disagreeably surprising intimation conveyed to him by his cousin when the light began to fail, and skating ceased, and a general move was made towards the house.

"But I thought, from what you said the other day," he remonstrated, "that you particularly wished me not to devote myself to her."

"I have changed my mind," answered Bessie coolly. "There are things about her which I confess that I don't much like; still one hardly expects to like one's sisters-in-law, and if you are contented, that is the chief thing."

"I wish," said Cuthbert, "you wouldn't speak of my future wife—if there is such a person—as your sister-in-law. It's so absurd to talk like that!"

"Dear me! this comes of trying to be friendly and affectionate, I suppose. Well, then, she shall be spoken of henceforth as my future cousin by marriage. The amusing part of it is that she has now a double chance of becoming related to us in that way; for Mother is openly offering Nigel to her in the benevolence of her heart. I don't suppose she will take him; still she may."

"I can't think that he will be so crazy as to ask her!" Cuthbert exclaimed. "The religious difficulty would be enough to stop him, surely, if there were no other."

"The religious difficulty could be got over, I presume, by her joining his Church—or even, as Mother amazingly suggests, by his joining hers. However, upon the whole, I don't think you have much reason to be alarmed."

"I am not alarmed," returned Cuthbert rather gruffly; "it makes no difference to me, one way or the other, except that I wish Nigel well and that I should like to enjoy my own Christmas, if you would let me."

Bessie laughed goodhumouredly and promised that it should be no fault of hers if he did not. Whereupon

he retorted, "It has been entirely your fault that I haven't enjoyed it up to now."

But she would not understand him, nor could he flatter himself that her apparent displeasure earlier in the day had been due to any other cause than a certain prejudice against Miss Dallison which she had now magnanimously waived. She regarded him (had not she herself kindly told him so ?) as a brother, and his gratitude for that sort of regard may be easily imagined.

Such as it was, it continued to be manifested throughout an evening which was characterised by much seasonable jollity. It had always been the custom at Knaresby to collect a large and somewhat uproarious assemblage on Christmas Day. The Rector of the parish, with his wife and his numerous offspring, old Humphry Trenchard and a few other neighbours were invited to dinner ; then came a Christmas tree, in which some members of the party were still young enough to take a lively interest, and the proceedings terminated with what Ethel Dallison inwardly called "*une danse effrénée*."

Ethel, by the time that this concluding item of the programme had been reached, was not in the very best of tempers. Cuthbert, who had deliberately and successfully evaded her throughout, had not once asked her to dance, while on the other hand, she had been persistently monopolised by Nigel, who did not dance himself, yet seemed to think that he was entitled to scowl every time that she was claimed by one of the other young men. Had she not been so annoyed with him, she might have taken the trouble to smooth him down ; she could have done that easily enough, and she was alive to the imprudence of precipitating an ultimately inevitable crisis. But he had exhausted her patience ; and so, when he made some excuse for leading

her out into the deserted hall in the middle of a dance, she had his sentence ready for him.

"I am very sorry," she cut short a fervent declaration of his by saying, "but it is only fair to tell you that what you profess to long for can never be. I may be received into the Church of Rome some day; I don't know; I can't make up my mind yet. But I can never marry you."

"Why do you say that?" he asked quickly. "You did not say so the other evening. You led me to believe that you might care for me if I could convince you——"

"You have convinced me of nothing," she interrupted, "except that you are exacting and irrational. Not that that really makes much difference; for I should have had to refuse you, anyhow."

"You love somebody else, then!"

"I don't know why men always leap to that conclusion when they are refused; it doesn't necessarily follow. But I think I can say with certainty that *you* love somebody else, or something else, more than you do me, and that is your Church. You would not marry me unless or until I joined your Church, would you?"

"No," he answered rather curtly, "I would not. Nevertheless, I love you."

"Thank you; I suppose I ought to be flattered, and to a moderate extent I am. But I don't care to walk behind anybody, not even behind the Pope and the Sacred College. I must be first or nowhere."

"I understand," he muttered, calling to mind old Humphry's prediction. And then, with sudden vehemence, "Why did you make me love you?"

"One can't prevent these things from happening," she replied, with a smile.

"Was it," he pursued, "out of sheer, wanton vanity,

or did you imagine that I could be persuaded, even for your sake, to commit what I must regard as next door to a sin?"

"I didn't know," she returned coolly, "that mixed marriages were next door to sin; but, however that may be, I feel sure that any woman who marries you will commit something rather nearer than next door to a folly. Perhaps you are too good for this world, or perhaps you are too scrupulous; at any rate, you are too exacting."

He jumped to his feet. "I think you are right," said he; "probably there is no place in the world for such men as I am, and our only course is to turn our backs upon it. You might have kept me in it if you had chosen; but I suppose that was not what you wished."

He strode off, without a word of leave-taking, secured his coat and hat, and presently let himself out into the night. Not without exultation did Ethel witness his departure; for surely, if he meant what his last assertion implied, Cuthbert's star must be in the ascendant. Cuthbert's and her own, she thought, attributing his marked neglect of her throughout the evening to a misunderstanding which could be very readily removed.

If there was any misunderstanding on Cuthbert's part, it was not of the nature that she imagined; but he could have told her that he misunderstood nothing, having been allowed no excuse for cherishing illusions. By degrees, and sorely against his will, he had become convinced that Bessie not only entertained a sisterly affection for him but wished to exhibit and emphasise its sisterly character; it only remained for him to accept what she offered and spare himself the needless humiliation of asking for more. But this was a doleful conclusion

to reach at the close of an evening which had been ostensibly hilarious ; so, instead of following the other young men to the smoking-room after the ladies had retired to bed, he betook himself to the library, where he sat gloomily staring at an expiring fire until the sound of the door opening and shutting behind him broke the thread of his meditations. The butler, no doubt, going round to extinguish the lamps.

"All right, Johnson," said he, without turning his head ; "I'll put out the lights before I go."

"How odd," returned a voice very soft and pleasant to the ear, "that you should apostrophise Johnson just as I am in search of his dictionary. I want to know what 'anserous' means."

Cuthbert rose politely. "I am not quite sure that you would find the word in any dictionary of the English language, Miss Dallison," he replied ; "still it is often used, especially in the sporting papers. It means belonging to or resembling a goose."

"Ah !" she returned, advancing and stationing herself near him, with her elbow resting on the mantelpiece, "then Mr. Trenchard, whom I overheard employing it just now, was not very far wrong."

"He seldom is," observed Cuthbert. And then, with a nascent suspicion, provoked by his companion's smile, "May I ask whether he did me the honour to apply the adjective to me ?"

"No, not to you ; although—but never mind that ! No, he was speaking of Mr. Nigel Scarth, who left suddenly, without saying goodnight to anybody."

"Why did he do that ?" asked Cuthbert quickly. "I mean, why did Nigel do that ?"

"Would you like me to tell you ? Perhaps I ought not to tell you. Perhaps I ought not to be talking to you here at this hour of the night at all."

"Oh, I don't think it matters," answered Cuthbert, looking rather as if he thought it did.

"Between ourselves then—and absolutely between ourselves, if you please—he asked me to marry him an hour or so ago."

"Is it possible!"

She laughed. "How flattering you are! Yes, it was possible for him to ask me, but it was not possible for me to accept him. And I told him so."

"I am very glad of that!" Cuthbert could not help exclaiming.

She did not realise that this ejaculation was even less flattering than his previous one. "I imagine," she went on, "that he will resume the Benedictine habit for good and all now."

"Oh, I hope not," returned Cuthbert, in some genuine anxiety; "we must not allow that to happen if we can help it."

She looked at him with an admiration the more sincere because she was conscious that her own love for him, real though it was, had been in some degree augmented by what she had heard from Mrs. Scarth about his prospects. Surely it must have occurred to him that Nigel's disappearance would mean his own highly probable enrichment! But the moment would have been ill chosen for reference to such a subject. She preferred to say gently:

"At least you are not displeased with me for having refused him, I hope?"

"Displeased? Oh, of course not—quite the contrary," he somewhat hurriedly replied.

"But you have been displeased all day about something, and you are displeased still. I wish you would tell me what is wrong. After all, we have been good friends from the first, you and I, and what is the use of

a friend to whom you can't speak when you are in trouble?"

Glancing at her face, which expressed the kindest sympathy and solicitude, he felt some qualms of conscience. He was not a vain man, and if at one time he had thought that Miss Dallison was not unwilling to number him amongst her slaves, he had never suspected her of having lost her heart to him. Other suspicions which he had harboured respecting her had possibly been unjust; she had, now that he came to think of it, always been very friendly to him, and—he wanted rather badly to be comforted. Therefore, without more ado, he poured forth the tale of his sorrows, confessing that he had loved his cousin Bessie from his boyhood, "although I didn't always know it, and although we have quarrelled at times," and that he had of late had some slight hopes, which had now been dashed to the ground. It took him a little time to unfold his narrative, and it was perhaps fortunate that he did not raise his eyes until he had made an end of speaking. When at length he did so, he was confronted by a pale, but perfectly composed and faintly amused countenance.

"Wasn't I," Ethel asked, "upon the point of saying that Mr. Trenchard's epithet was quite as appropriate to you as to the person for whom it was meant? Of course there isn't the slightest reason for you to despair; if your cousin didn't care more for you than you think, she would hardly have paid me the compliment of being jealous, as she undoubtedly was this afternoon when you were talking to me on the lake. Only I shouldn't, if I were you, be too humble about it; it is always a mistake to invite snubs."

She gave him some further advice and encouragement of a conventional order and finally smilingly wished him good luck, on wishing him goodnight. Not until she

had left the room did he begin to wonder why in the world she had entered it. Scarcely for purposes of philological research, he presumed. But at any rate she had managed to cheer him up a little, and he was proportionately grateful.

He might have felt more or he might have felt less so if he could have seen her as she was at that moment, lying, face downwards, upon her bed and moaning under her breath in the very extremity of humiliation and defeat. In that posture she remained for a long time. When she raised herself, she walked straight to the toilet-table and gazed fixedly into the glass, which had no explanation to offer her of a grotesque enigma.

"*That* girl!" she muttered. "If she were even pretty!—but she isn't." Then: "Well, at least I didn't betray myself; one must be thankful for small mercies." And, after another pause: "But they shall never have Rixmouth, if I can help it—as I certainly can!"

CHAPTER XIX

CHRISTMAS AT LANNOWE

GREETING his only guest on Christmas morning, Lord Lannowe compunctiously declared that he was ashamed of himself.

"It isn't my fault, you know, Ned ; still it does seem too bad to have enticed you down here and to have failed in inducing another human being to meet you."

"You wouldn't say that," Colonel Gervase returned, "if you had the least idea of how glad I am to be delivered from the other human beings."

He spoke the strict truth. He wanted nobody ; least of all did he want the Duchess, from whom he had received a summoning telegram two days before, and to whom he had made so bold as to reply that he could not break his engagement to her father. It was, when he looked back upon it, a very long time since he had found pleasure in the society of the Duchess, and her apparently undiminished desire for his was due, as he was well aware, to causes scarcely flattering to his self-esteem. He was useful to her in various small ways, he was at once the symbol and the survival of victories no longer as frequent as of yore ; he was, moreover, the embodiment of a habit, and Frances, despite her singularly youthful aspect, had come to a time of life at which habits are not easily abandoned. To be sure, he had himself reached that time of life, and there were habits which he felt that he

could abandon without any difficulty at all ; but that was because—— At this point in his reflections he came to an abrupt pause, threw away the cigarette which had helped a little to soothe them and marched off to the chapel, in obedience to the tinkling bell which for some ten minutes past had been calling him thither. There are more profitable subjects for meditation on Christmas morning than the fact that one is an old fool.

Nigel Scarth, who shortly afterwards knelt down beside the Colonel, suspected himself of being a young fool and did not shirk the thought. He did not think, however, as his neighbour thought of him, that he had displayed folly in its extremest and most unaccountable form by throwing away the chance that Heaven had vouchsafed to him of making Monica Ferrand his wife. Rather was he disposed to return thanks for his preservation from an irremediable mistake. What little he had seen of his former *fiancée* since his return home had quite sufficed to convince him that she was as glad as he to be released, and, although he had no doubt that she would have married him cheerfully, had such been the wish of her family, he had likewise no doubt that she would have done so against her personal inclination. So it was not remorse or regret on Monica's account that made him silent and absent-minded at luncheon, which meal he could not very well escape without an appearance of churlishness.

"We have lost one of our two visitors, you see," Lord Lannowe remarked. "Your people at Knaresby filched her from us upon the plea that she must be given an opportunity of worshipping with her co-religionists. It wasn't a very good excuse, inasmuch as the parish church here is hardly a mile away ; but I suppose they didn't like to hurt our feelings by saying

that they could offer her better fun than we can. As for the religious question, perhaps that wouldn't have troubled her much, eh, Monnie? Well, I'm no proselytiser; I leave that sort of thing to my juniors."

"I think she will come to us," said Monica, who was not in the least ashamed of having brought all the influence in her power to bear upon her friend.

Nigel glanced interrogatively at Monsignor Nolan, whose broad, goodhumoured face told no tales, and Gervase rather unkindly remarked, "She seems to be travelling by a circuitous route."

"They always do," said Lord Lannowe, referring, it must be assumed, to Miss Dallison's sex in general.

"What does it matter?" broke in Nigel, with a touch of impatience. "All roads lead to Rome."

But this was the only contribution that he made to a discussion which lasted a few minutes longer and which gave him some uncomfortable sensations. Monica, he knew, believed in and was sincerely anxious for Ethel's speedy conversion; but Gervase was visibly sceptical, while Monsignor Nolan was guarded in his utterances and Lord Lannowe seemed disposed to treat the subject in a spirit of misplaced levity. Nigel could not help wondering what they would all say and think if they were to discover what he had in his mind, and it was a nervous dread of betraying himself that caused him to take his leave at the earliest possible moment.

"I don't quite know," Lord Lannowe said, after Nigel had departed and Gervase, by his invitation, had accompanied him into his private room to smoke a cigarette, "what to make of that fellow. He is so—how shall I express it?—so confoundedly incongruous!"

"Because of his outburst a month or so ago, do you mean?" asked Gervase. "Oh, I don't think there was anything so very extraordinary or inconsistent in that.

These men with sharp chins and volcanic eyes are always liable to outbreaks. They may develope into saints and martyrs or they make take to gambling or drink; one is never safe with them. Let us at least be thankful that Monica is safe from him." He added interrogatively after a moment, "I suppose she is?"

"Absolutely," answered Lord Lannowe. "All the more so because she is full of compassion for him. I wish she would have a little compassion upon me and drop this persistent hankering after convent life! I could understand it—I don't say that I should like it or approve of it even then—still I could understand it if she had been through several London seasons and had—well, in short, failed. But it is early days to call her a failure, I think, though Frances makes no bones about it. Of course I admit that she is no beauty——"

"Perhaps there may be room for two opinions about that," interjected Gervase.

"Oh, no, my dear Ned; you want to be polite and kind, but we can't shut our eyes to the fact that she is the ugly duckling of the family. All the same, I can't see why some very decent fellow shouldn't take a fancy to her, and I am sure she would make the best of wives and mothers. Say a word to her, will you, if you can find an opening? There isn't any use in my worrying her, Nolan tells me."

"I am afraid there would be still less in my doing so."

"No; she thinks a lot of your opinion. As a general rule, she doesn't seem to hit it off very well with men; but she has always had a great liking for you; I remember her telling me that of all the men whom she met in London you were the only one she cared about. Anyhow, you might try what you can do."

One result of the above conversation was that, later

in the afternoon, Monsignor Nolan, who was writing letters in his little room upstairs, was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Am I disturbing you?" Gervase asked, when he had been requested to come in.

"You are," replied the priest, laughing, "and I'm only too thankful to be disturbed by anybody who isn't a correspondent with a dozen superfluous questions to ask."

"Well, I am going to ask you some questions, Father," said Gervase; "I don't know whether you will consider them superfluous or not."

"I'll tell you that when I've heard them. Sit down and make yourself comfortable."

"It is about Monica. Her father tells me that she is bent upon taking the veil."

"Oh, bent upon it—no. She talks about it, and I wouldn't say but opposition might goad her into making the attempt. That would mean absence from home for six months or maybe a year."

"Why not for good and all?"

"Because no community would keep her."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Gervase, rather surprised.

The priest laughed. "No, I'm not sure; but I'd lay long odds. I've had some experience. Miss Monica is one of the best girls that ever walked the earth; only she isn't cut out for a nun. She has other qualities and, I hope, another destiny."

"May I ask whether you still hope that her destiny is to marry young Scarth?"

"I'll answer you frankly, Colonel Gervase. I did until within the last few days cherish the hope of bringing Miss Monica and Nigel together again; but I've had to abandon it. It wouldn't be her wish even if it

were his, and he makes no secret of its not being his. No ; that chapter is closed."

Gervase stared silently at the fire for a few minutes before saying: "So you think that for the present it would be unwise to oppose her?"

"I'll tell you just what I think," Monsignor Nolan returned. "I think enough has been said about filial duty. She is very fond of her father and she doesn't want to leave him; but she thinks he can get on very well and amuse himself very well without her. He has virtually given her to understand as much by his anxiety, which he doesn't conceal, that she should marry. You can't blow hot and cold at one and the same time. But"—here Monsignor Nolan paused and took a huge pinch of snuff—"there are other arguments which might possibly be employed with greater success."

"Other arguments?" repeated Gervase. "Of what sort do you mean? And by whom are they to be employed?"

Monsignor Nolan folded his hands and gazed up benignly at the ceiling. "Indeed I couldn't tell you," he replied; "what would an old priest know about courting? But if you'll be so good as to find me the man I'll trust him to find the arguments."

"I am afraid I should have rather a poor chance of discovering what the Duchess of Leith and Lady Bracebridge profess to have sought for in vain."

"You might try," observed Monsignor Nolan, placidly twirling his thumbs.

"Very well; I'll try. Her father wants me to dissuade her, if I can, from entering religion. I don't know why he should imagine that I have any influence with her, but it seems that he does. At any rate, my saying a few words to her could do no harm, I suppose."

"On the contrary, a few words from you might do all the good in the world perhaps. Provided always that they were words of the right kind."

"Well, Father," said Gervase, "will you give me a hint as to the right kind of words?"

"Ah, now," cried Monsignor Nolan, laughing, "what do you take me for at all? Haven't I just reminded you that I'm as ignorant as I ought to be about such things? If you were to take a walk through the shrubberies and warm your feet, maybe the words would come to you; it's wonderful how exercise stimulates the intelligence on a cold day. I wish I could offer to go out with you, but I've my letters to finish, worse luck!"

Gervase took the hint and withdrew the more willingly because he was much disconcerted. To have arrived at middle age, to have long enjoyed a not undeserved reputation for reticence, to have discharged in a manner pronounced satisfactory by high authorities the duties of a public post which demands some control of countenance and speech, and at the end of all to find that the innermost secret of your heart is so obvious to a mere bystander that he does not even deem it needful to conceal his acquaintance with it is really enough to disconcert anybody. Nevertheless, the Colonel set out on the brisk constitutional recommended to him with a lightness of heart which was not altogether produced by exercise and sharp air. After making every allowance for the kindly old priest's desire to see Monica married to some honest man, every allowance for the ignorance respecting such subjects to which he had himself pleaded guilty, and all the deductions which of course ought to be made from his implied encouragement, the fact remained that there was at least one person to whom the occurrence of a certain event did not appear impossible, grotesque, out of the question.

That certainly was not a great deal in the way of a remainder; still it was something, and it sufficed to impart a youthful lightness to Colonel Gervase's gait.

This modified cheerfulness did not, to be sure, survive the reflection that disparity of age was not the only barrier between him and Monica Ferrand. The story, so widely known, of his early disappointment and his faithful, respectful constancy could scarcely have failed to reach her ears. It was indeed almost in virtue of his long constancy (now at last exhausted) that he had been admitted to the footing of a member of the family; partly in virtue of it perhaps that he had ventured to speak to Monica as he had done, and to invite her confidence. With what sort of grace could he now discard the part of a benevolent counsellor and assume that of a lover? He was a fastidious man, and he could not but see that there was something rather repellent, as well as rather ludicrous, in a belated transfer of allegiance from the Duchess of Leith to her younger sister.

"And even if it didn't strike me in that light," said he to himself, "it would strike Monica. No; I won't lose what little influence I may have with her, and I believe I have a little. It isn't, after all, a question of losing anything by holding my tongue, for I have nothing to lose in that way, and if she should guess what one of my reasons is for imploring her not to betake herself to a nunnery, she must guess it in spite, not in consequence, of what I shall say."

It was after he had proceeded for some considerable distance along one of the straight shrubbery walks which skirt the park at Lannowe that he reached the above sage and sober resolution, and hardly had he done so when he espied Monica herself stepping quickly towards him beneath the bare boughs, with an empty

basket swinging in one of her hands. Had that crafty old Nolan foreseen and designed the encounter, knowing that the young lady would be returning at that hour from certain seasonable and charitable visits? It did not seem altogether unlikely; but, however that might be, the encounter was not one which Gervase felt any inclination to shirk. He quickened his pace, waved his hat and called out, in accents as nearly resembling those of a cheery, benevolent uncle as he could make them:

"Now I've caught you, Monica, and you won't escape, I warn you, until you have had the talking-to that you deserve!"

She looked at him with an apprehensive smile and with anxious, half-reproachful eyes. "I am afraid I know what you are going to say," she remarked; "I wish you wouldn't say it!"

"Oh, I am going to say it," he returned resolutely. "For your father's sake, as well as for your own, I am bound to dissuade you, if I can, from an utterly uncalled-for sacrifice."

He proceeded to advance, one by one, timehonoured arguments in which the weak spot was quite as perceptible to him as it was to his hearer. Against a genuine vocation no argument can hold, and it was a relief to him that she did not confront him with that unanswerable rejoinder. On the other hand, she mildly reminded him that what he urged was only what any girl, situated as she was, must of course have fully considered at the outset.

"If I were really wanted at home, I would stay at home as long as my father lives," she declared; "but, although I am very fond of him and we are very happy together, I am not really wanted. What he wishes is that I should marry."

"Well, that is unselfish of him."

"Yes, perhaps; but it shows that he does not find me indispensable. And—I cannot marry now."

"Why not, Monica?"

"Because—well, you know that I was engaged to be married, and you know how that ended."

A swift and somewhat untimely spasm of jealousy gripped the heart of her mentor, who was aware of an uncontrollable change in his voice as he asked: "Do you mean that you still care for young Scarth?" And, on her shaking her head, he added, "Then I don't see what your having been engaged to him provisionally for a short time has to do with it."

"Only that—how shall I say it? For girls to talk about such things to men is—is not easy!"

"Oh, to a man of my age!"

He was not yet forty, and there were moments when he looked scarcely more than thirty; yet he was, as a fact, Monica's senior by a good score of years, and it may have been on that account that she hesitatingly conceded to him the privilege to which he laid claim.

"I was going to say," she faltered, "that I did care for him. That is, I told him so once, when he asked me."

"And afterwards you found that you had made a mistake? But that is not at all a rare experience. You will know better next time perhaps."

She made a gesture of dissent. "I want to be a nun," she declared, with gentle obstinacy.

"Because you are afraid of being forced into marrying somebody whom you don't love, I suppose. Nothing of the sort will happen; nothing of the sort ever does happen in England."

Loveless marriages, or marriages in which the love is all on one side, take place with tolerable frequency in England. He remembered this as soon as the words

were out of his mouth, likewise remembering that the assertion to which he had just committed himself was a somewhat bold one to make to a daughter of the late Lady Lannowe. Lady Lannowe, however, was no more, and he hastened to resume :

"I will take it upon me to promise that your father will never urge you to marry against your will. As for the mistakes that one may make about one's own feelings, who doesn't make them? Look at my own case, for instance. Once upon a time, as I daresay you know, I fancied myself desperately in love with your sister."

"But surely you were!" exclaimed Monica, raising a pair of amazed and slightly distressed blue eyes to his.

As an honest man, he was constrained to reply, "Yes, I was; but not for long, I think. One clings to these mistakes; one doesn't like admitting them to oneself. Anyhow, I afterwards met somebody for whom I came to care a thousand times more than I had ever cared for her. But my love-affairs are of no interest or importance; I merely alluded to them as a sort of illustration."

Monica nodded. "Don't you think," she asked, "that men may change more easily in that way than women? I know very little about either; only I believe I do know about myself. I shall never marry now."

"Yet you don't love Nigel Scarth?"

"Oh, no," she answered in a low voice, and began to walk rather more quickly.

For a distance of forty paces or so he silently scanned what he could see of her face (for she had averted it a little), then asked suddenly, "Monica, is there any man whom you do love?"

It was a most unfair inquiry to make, and her eyes, when she turned them reproachfully towards him, seemed to intimate that she thought it so; but, as if to leave

him in no doubt upon the subject, she retorted, with the sort of defiance which even the meekest of created beings will display when driven into a corner :

"Who is the person for whom you care a thousand times more than you do for Frances?"

He laughed. "Question for question, I admit that you are as much entitled to a reply as I am. Well, if I answer yours, will you answer mine?"

"If I do," she returned, after a moment of hesitation, "will you promise to ask me nothing more?"

He also hesitated for a moment before giving the required promise, but ended by making it; after which arose the natural difficulty of which of them was to speak first. This might have awaited solution for some little time, had not Monica chanced to drop her basket. He stooped to pick it up for her; their hands met; their eyes met—and then, on a sudden, there was no further need for questions or answers.

"I never was more astonished in my life!" Lord Lannowe declared, about an hour later, when certain avowals had been made to him; "but I am sure I need not tell you, my dear Ned, that I have seldom or never been more pleased." He added presently, in a somewhat rueful undertone, "I don't know what Frances will say."

"I do," answered Gervase calmly. "She will say that it has all been her doing from first to last, and that she is sure it will turn out well, because both Monica and I are such good, docile sort of creatures."

It must be assumed that he knew the lady in whose name he spoke; for that was just what the Duchess of Leith subsequently did say.

CHAPTER XX

VESTIGIA RETRORSUM

“WELL, my dear boy,” said old Humphry Trenchard, when the discreet Bailey, after conducting a visitor into his master’s presence, had retired noiselessly, “you have come to explain your conduct of last night, I hope.”

“Yes,” answered Nigel.

“I am glad of that ; for, between ourselves, it seems to me to stand in need of some explanation. I don’t want to scold ; but I can’t help saying that to bounce out of a house where you have been hospitably entertained, without even saying goodnight, is something more than bad manners. It is inviting people to form conjectures as to your motives which may be embarrassing for others as well as for yourself. And that is hardly fair upon the lady, perhaps.”

“Perhaps,” returned Nigel, “the lady has hardly been fair upon me ; but, be that as it may, I am not at all afraid of embarrassing her. And conjectures are of the less importance because I really have so little to conceal. You, at all events, will have had no difficulty in conjecturing what took place last night.”

“Not very much,” Mr. Trenchard confessed, smiling compassionately and laying his hand upon the young man’s wrist, which was within his reach. “She told you, I presume, that if you could not trust her enough

to marry her before her formal reception into your Church she must decline to marry you at all."

"No, she did not say that ; you were mistaken about her there, as I told you that you were. What she did was to refuse me unconditionally and unequivocally."

Old Humphry raised his eyebrows. This was unexpected news to him, and he acknowledged that it was. He further acknowledged (though possibly not without a mental reservation) that he was unable to guess what she was driving at.

Nigel sighed rather wearily. "You think her selfish and designing and unprincipled," he remarked. "I have thought her all that myself, and then again I have taken a different view of her. As far as I am concerned, it matters very little now ; but I daresay, after all, she flirted with me for the simple reason that she was in love with somebody else and wanted to pique him. If so, she may have succeeded. Now that I am out of it, I almost hope she has ; for, in spite of what he says, I suspect that Cuthbert Gretton is fond of her in his heart."

Mr. Trenchard laughed and shook his head, yet looked a trifle uneasy. "Cuthbert is a poor man," he observed.

"At the present moment, yes ; but he may be better off some day. Besides, one need not always impute sordid motives even to people who have not treated one too well. Anyhow, I did not come here to talk about that, but to beg a small favour of you."

"Then you may be quite sure," returned the other unhesitatingly, "that it will be granted if I have it in my power to do as you wish. I hope you know that it is a privilege to me to serve you. But before we say anything more, my dear boy, let me implore you not to act rashly. You have had a great disappointment, a great

blow ; I make every allowance for that ; but don't—pray don't—ask me to aid and abet in some step which may wreck your whole future ! ”

“ My request is only that you will come and stay a few days with me,” answered Nigel, after a scarcely perceptible pause which, brief though it was, gave him time to decide against saying what he had been going to say. “ Would it bore you very much to come tomorrow ? You are quite right about my having had a blow, and—— ”

As he did not finish his sentence, Mr. Trenchard briskly finished it for him.

“ And you don't want to sit brooding over it all by yourself. Of course you don't, and of course I shall be only too delighted to give you the solace—if it is one—of my rather dull company. I take your invitation as a high compliment ; though I wish, for your sake, that I were twenty-five years younger and had the use of my eyes.”

“ You will do very well as you are, thanks,” returned Nigel, laughing, “ and a great deal better than anybody else whom I could name. One thing is certain, it is only you who have preserved me from wrecking the whole future of the Rixmouth estate. I shudder at the thought of the blunders I should have committed already, but for you ! ”

This, at all events, was a form of compliment to which old Humphry was peculiarly sensible.

“ Oh, my dear fellow, you exaggerate ! ” he protested. “ You have been good enough to listen to me, and perhaps, from knowing the place and the people so well as I do, I may have been able to render you some small services ; but you should be finding your feet by this time. I am glad to think that you won't require my meddling much longer.”

For another week at the outside, Nigel imagined. At the end of a week all legal formalities would doubtless have been accomplished, the neighbourhood would have learned that there was one squire less and one monk more in England, Rixmouth Castle would have been handed over to some person designated by Uncle Robert, and Mr. Trenchard would be freed from a position of temporary trust. He imparted no inkling of his intentions to the benign old man who would of course have deemed it a duty to combat them, and he hoped, as he walked away from Glen Cottage, that his method of throwing up the sponge would be forgiven him. His mind being absolutely made up, argument or entreaty could only be futile, as well as distressing; accomplished facts are infinitely preferable to announcements, and if nobody is indispensable, least of all can a conspicuous failure be so. How conspicuously he had contrived to fail in a station of life which he had never sought his history during the past six months amply attested; that his disappearance would cause serious regret to a single human being he neither believed nor wished to believe.

Trudging along beneath a low leaden sky, with early night already approaching, he became aware that the fickle climate had yet another surprise in store for those whose amusements depend upon its vagaries. The wind, what there was of it, had shifted to the southward, the hard surface of the road gave ever so slightly to the tread, the air, though still intensely cold, had ceased to be nipping, and a suggestion of mist was slowly forming above the meadows. But in the haven of rest for which Nigel was bound changes of weather were noticeable only as involving a greater or less degree of voluntarily incurred discomfort. He was wondering, as he had often wondered before, how it was

that material comfort, or the sacrifice of it, had come to mean next to nothing to him when a cheery voice called out :

"They'll be drawing your coverts yet before the new year, my boy! If we're not in for a true thaw this time my rheumatic joints have lost the gift of prophecy."

Monsignor Nolan might be rheumatic, but he remained an active man for his years. Striding forth from a by-road at a pace which some of his juniors would have envied, he mentioned that he was on his way home, after taking a funeral in a distant hamlet, and added : "I've news for you. How are you going to receive it, I wonder?"

"Philosophically, I should think," answered Nigel, smiling. "I can't imagine any news that I should not receive in a philosophical spirit just now."

"So happy, or so unhappy, as that! Well, Miss Monica and Colonel Gervase are to be married. Now, then!"

"I am very glad to hear it," Nigel declared, "and only a little bit surprised. Did you think I should be distressed?"

"Indeed I wasn't entirely without hope that you would," the other owned. "I don't say that other hopes which I've had about you and her aren't as dead as Queen Anne; but I'd like to think that you realised what you have lost."

"I believe," answered Nigel slowly, "that I realise all I ought to realise. Amongst other things, that Miss Ferrand has had a Providential escape and that I myself have had another. I don't mean from her."

"Oho! Am I to congratulate you upon having come to your senses, then?"

"Yes, I think I may say that I have come to my senses—though only as a consequence of having parted

with them. Two days ago I actually asked Miss Dallison to marry me. She refused me in a way that was not at all discreditable to her—I have nothing to complain of, except that she has made a fool of me for some little time, and that may have been almost as much my fault as hers—yet I had hardly left her before I began to return thanks for what had happened to me.”

“Well might you do that! The woman is false all through.”

“Do you think so? You have had opportunities of judging lately, and it certainly doesn't seem as if her wish to be received into the Church had ever been sincere; but in other respects perhaps she is neither worse nor better than the rest of her sex. For my part, I bear no malice against her.”

For reasons of his own, Nigel was glad to have had the occasion of giving Monsignor Nolan this dispassionate assurance; but he did not want to pursue the subject, which he hastened to change by recurring to Monica's betrothal and inquiring whether it had the approval of the family.

“His lordship approves; we haven't had time to hear from the Duchess yet,” answered Monsignor Nolan drily. “To tell you the truth, I don't think we are going to trouble ourselves much about anybody's approval but our own—which we have got. Still I wouldn't be sorry to let Miss Monica know from you that she has yours.”

Nigel very heartily charged him with the invited message, wished him good evening and made off, without waiting for probable questions to which there might be difficulty in replying. To Monsignor Nolan, as to old Humphry Trenchard, it seemed best to present an accomplished fact.

Rixmouth Castle, when he stepped out of the

darkness across its imposing threshold, received him with respectful, obsequious servants, soft carpets, a glow of roaring fires and an illumination of many lamps and candles. How glorious it must seem to some people to be rich! he thought—how glorious it had once seemed to himself! But that, to be sure, had been before he had had personal experience of the almost ludicrous inadequacy of wealth and its little fidgetting restraints. His successor, at all events, it was to be hoped, would not be a bachelor, or would not long remain one.

Seating himself at his writing-table in the library, he scribbled a telegram in French to the Abbot at Lew Abbey and despatched it, mentioning at the same time to the butler that Mr. Trenchard would be coming on the morrow to stay a few days. Then he had a rather long letter to write to Mr. Linklater, the composition of which occupied him until it was time to dress for dinner. Not without a sense of relief did he reflect that he would never again have to dress for dinner, never again have to sit, solemnly silent, in a huge room, while deft, light-footed domestics flitted round him, offering him dishes which he did not want and wines which he often left untasted. In the refectory at the Abbey there was silence indeed, but there was not much to eat, and for what there was appetite was seldom lacking. Physical fatigue, too—that greatest of earthly blessings, which comes only now and then to the rich of this world; though they strive after it so eagerly and pathetically. He remembered Cuthbert's once winding up a discussion upon the monastic life by saying impatiently, "Oh, my dear fellow, there's no mystery about it; I know what the whole thing amounts to. Mortification and stupefaction—there it is for you in two words. You make a desert for yourselves and call it peace." That, of course, was an unfair and distorted

summary; yet there was just a germ of truth in it. The senses must be conquered, wearied—stupefied, if anybody likes to say so—in order that the soul may live. Or if this be not a rule of universal application, it holds good at least for a certain minority of mortals who cannot adjust themselves to compromises. For himself compromise had never been possible (although Monica Ferrand might have seemed transiently to impersonate it); the choice had always lain between salvation and perdition, and if he could not flatter himself that he had chosen the former, he could acknowledge that it had been granted to him. He had told Ethel Dallison that he loved her because the English language could supply him with no more accurate word; but in truth he did not love her and anticipated only a little difficulty in forgetting her. That he experienced next to none in forgiving her was surely a sufficient proof that her sway over him was a thing of the past.

"I am going," he wrote, after dinner, in a somewhat lengthy epistle to Mr. Trenchard, "back to the Abbey, where I know that I shall be welcomed, and where I hope and expect to end my days. You will probably say that I am running away from my duty. I can only reply that it is sometimes necessary to have the courage to be a coward, or at any rate to look like one. In the world I should never be able to trust myself; in the cloister I shall find safety, as well as happiness. That is my real reason for decamping; but if I wanted to make excuses, I might plead—with what truth nobody knows better than you do!—that I am quite hopeless as a squire, that my tenants dislike me, that my neighbours can't make head or tail of me, and that the estate could hardly be in more incompetent hands than mine. I wish it could remain in yours, which are so singularly competent; but that of course is impossible. I hope,



however, that you will add to the many kindnesses for which I have to thank you by remaining here a few days and winding matters up for me. I have written to Mr. Linklater, who, I presume, will run down to confer with you and with my uncle. I really do not think that I shall give extra trouble to anybody by taking to my heels in this unannounced fashion, and I hope that neither you nor any other of the friends in these parts whom I shall see no more will set me down as ungrateful because I shrink from the trial of bidding you all farewell."

It is asserted by those who should be capable of judging that one of the surest signs of a vocation is the facility with which the religious aspirant can break with earthly relations, friends and ties. If this be so, Nigel Scarth had good reason for the confidence that he felt in himself. Not only without a pang, but with a sense of infinite assuagement did he give orders, on the following morning, for his portmanteau to be packed and for a dogcart to be brought round to take him to the station. He had been called away, he explained, and could not name a time for his return; but Mr. Trenchard, for whom he had left a note, would probably remain a day or two at the Castle and would give such instructions with regard to household matters as might be required. No; he did not wish letters to be forwarded, and it was therefore unnecessary for him to leave any address.

Thus quietly and readily did Nigel shake off fetters by which it is safe to say that he would never have been bound, had the late Mr. Thomas Scarth realised the difference between leading a horse to the water and making him drink. The late Mr. Thomas Scarth, a man who seldom cared or tried to realise the unpalatable, had desired in the first place to disappoint his

brother by his will, which amiable object of his had been tolerably well fulfilled ; but he had fallen into the mistake of imagining that he could convert his unknown nephew into a sound Protestant by the exhibition of a powerful bait, and if he could have witnessed the said nephew's light-hearted renunciation of money and lands for an idea, he might have turned uneasily in the family vault. Likewise he might have regretted having committed to Robert—just by way of a spiteful little parting dig—powers which were not very likely to be exercised with wisdom or discrimination.

Those powers, Nigel hoped and believed, would be exercised in favour of Cuthbert Gretton ; but in truth he gave little thought to his successor or to what he was leaving behind him during a tedious cross-country journey which occupied the whole day. Already a great gulf, which he was conscious of no desire to bridge, yawned between him and the past. He was Nigel Scarth no longer ; soon he would be Brother Anselm once more, and in process of time, he trusted, Father Anselm. For the Lord Abbot, on the occasion of his recent visit to the monastery, had been very kind and sympathetic, had rebuked him but gently for the sins to which he had pleaded guilty and, though guarded in his remarks, had seemed to foresee what was coming. " You are nearer to us now, my son," he had said, " than you were when you lived amongst us."

The sun had set in a mild, moist atmosphere ere Nigel reached his far western destination and was admitted to the little bare parlour in which he had once received the disturbing news that he had inherited a fortune. But the thin, shrivelled old man who presently joined him there, and before whom he fell on his knees, was a very different person from the impassive Abbot who had refused him all help on that momentous day,

and it was a tender and compassionate voice that said to him :

"I have been expecting you, my son—*expectans, expectavi* ! I thank God that my prayers for you have been heard."

"You think that I have a vocation, in spite of all?" Nigel faltered.

"I have never doubted it," answered the other tranquilly ; "but it was necessary for you to be convinced and it was necessary that you should obey. I can encourage you now ; I could not have encouraged you a year ago. You are afraid perhaps that you have come back to us because the world has disappointed you and because you have a quarrel with it. No ; if that had been so, you would have reverted to profligacy, not to the better life. Examine yourself more closely and you will find that your heart has been with us all along. Have no fear ; only believe, only obey, and the power which has guided you home will lead you on from strength to strength."

It seems likely enough that the Abbot, who had studied many novices, knew what he was talking about. It was, at any rate, noticeable that he made no inquiry as to whether this repentant prodigal had brought back any sheaves to the Abbey with him or only empty husks. At a later date Mr. Linklater observed that, to give the old fellow his due, he was disinterested, if somewhat dull and reticent ; but the Abbot had nothing particular to say to Mr. Linklater, and the rules of his Order enjoin economy of needless words. To Brother Anselm he had, on that first evening, a good deal to say—so much, indeed, that the subject with which he dealt was disposed of finally then and there.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CAPRICES OF FORTUNE

NOT many people can boast of being good losers, nor amongst the few who are do women form a majority. It was therefore to Ethel Dallison's credit that she was able, on her return to Lannowe, to exhibit a serene exterior and to declare, in answer to inquiries, that she had enjoyed her little visit to the Robert Scarths immensely.

"It all went off as well as possible," she told Monica; "the only person who didn't seem entirely happy was Mr. Gretton, and if he isn't happy by this time, he will be soon. You must have noticed, of course, that he is desperately smitten with his cousin, who diverted herself by holding him at arm's length. That sort of thing is rather *vieux jeu*, but I daresay it is still considered effective in country neighbourhoods, and she won't keep it up much longer. I took the liberty of recommending him to be bold. Isn't it amazing that such advice should be necessary! Still, one likes him all the better for being diffident, poor fellow!"

The good-natured tolerant smile upon the speaker's lips gave no hint of the rage and mortification that were in her heart. It was perhaps well for her that she was angry, inasmuch as wrath helped her to bear the heaviest and most unexpected blow that had ever fallen upon her in her life; but it did not seem likely to prove quite

so well for those upon whom she was resolved to be avenged. Not that she used the word revenge to herself or deemed them worthy of a sentiment somewhat beneath her; only she really could not allow them to acquire without an effort what she had too hastily refused; she really could not submit to be not only disdained but robbed. Consequently Nigel must be whistled back—nothing would be simpler!—and should a so-called change of faith be required of one who had no faith at all, the change would have to take place. Rixmouth *valait bien une messe*. Meanwhile, she heard with affectionate and sympathetic interest the news which Monica had to impart to her.

"This is what I have always hoped for," she declared, "and I have always liked Colonel Gervase, although I know he doesn't like me. You will be perfectly happy with him."

In the name of her absent Ned, Monica protested against the lack of discrimination imputed to him; but Ethel, laughing goodhumouredly, repeated:

"Oh, he doesn't like me; he doesn't believe in me. After all, it isn't necessary that he should. So long as you continue to be my friend and to give me credit for honest intentions I am satisfied."

She foresaw that Monica's friendship would be useful, if not essential, to her; she foresaw that Monsignor Nolan might be capable of doubting the honesty of her intentions and of raising difficulties with regard to her reception into the Church of Rome; what she did not foresee was the danger of Nigel's slipping through her fingers before she should have time to hoist a signal of recall for his benefit. For one moment she contemplated writing him a note, but decided against tactics so crude and so superfluous. "I have had enough of making offers of marriage to last me my life!" said she to herself,

with a bitter little laugh. No ; some chance encounter between her and the man whose wife she intended to become would surely be brought about within a few days, and when once she should have met him there would be little trouble about conciliating him.

The rise of temperature which began that evening, and which resolved itself on the morrow into a definite thaw, promised to furnish her with the desired occasion ; for Lord Lannowe, on receiving by post an intimation that the hounds were to meet hard by on the following morning, predicted that the whole neighbourhood would turn out on horseback or on wheels, to celebrate the return of hunting weather, and the master of Rixmouth Castle, it might be assumed, would feel bound to do as others did, whether he himself happened to be in the mood for sport or not.

The place appointed for the meet was Knaresby Cross, on the edge of a common rather more than half way from Lannowe to Mr. Robert Scarth's domain, and thither the calmly expectant Ethel was conveyed in Monica's pony-chaise, Lord Lannowe and Colonel Gervase, who were going to follow the hounds, having decided that they might just as well ride for so short a distance. Calmly expectant she remained, even when, on their arrival, no sign of Nigel could be seen in a rather large assemblage of horsemen and vehicles. It was not at all improbable, she thought, that he would purposely turn up late, and although a hurried greeting might be the most that circumstances would admit of her obtaining from him, that would quite suffice for the time being. Nature had bestowed eyes upon her for other purposes besides that of scanning a crowd in search of somebody whom it did not contain.

Upon two persons whom it did contain her eyes fell with a swift contraction of the brows which was the

involuntary result of a contraction of the heart-strings. This, however, was but a momentary display of weakness, and she was able to return Cuthbert Gretton's bow with a friendly nod. He did not approach the pony-carriage; his horse was fresh and somewhat unmanagable; also it struck Ethel that his spirits were by no means as high as those of his mount. Was he still in disgrace, then? It did not in the least matter, and well she knew it, whether he was or not; yet she derived a certain irrational satisfaction from noticing that Bessie, who was riding at her father's side, never once turned her head in his direction. Mr. Scarth, in pink and bestriding a powerful grey, looked almost amiable, for once.

"When old Robert puts that face on it's a sure sign that we are going to find," somebody remarked to Monica.

Mr. Scarth's knowledge of localities may have explained his cheerfulness of aspect. At any rate, the mute prophecy ascribed to him was speedily fulfilled; for hardly had the hounds been put into the neighbouring gorse when a fox broke, and before Ethel had had time to realise what had happened, the whole field was off in pursuit. With mournful interest she watched the galloping horsemen as long as they remained within her ken, remembering that Cuthbert had once promised to take her out hunting and recognising the extreme improbability of that promise ever being kept. But, recognising also the futility of crying over spilt milk, she registered an inward vow that she would conquer her infatuation for the man who had so grievously humiliated her and who was in reality more ordinary, less interesting, less good-looking and less well-to-do than Nigel Scarth. It was a little unfortunate, to be sure, that she should have informed him of the latter's

proposal and rejection ; but—*tant pis* ! Let him form his own conclusions and let those laugh who win. Prize for prize, Nigel must surely be held to take precedence of Bessie.

Nor did the absence of her destined captive disquiet her much, although she would have been better pleased if he had put in an appearance. There were, of course, plenty of methods open to her of fortuitously crossing his path, and she was turning these over in her mind when Monsignor Nolan, who seldom missed a near meet of the hounds, came up, panting and mopping his brow with a big silk handkerchief, to beg for a lift home.

"No more hunting for pedestrians today," he remarked regretfully. "I was thinking maybe we'd hit them off again by cutting across towards Rixmouth ; but the fox has as little regard for my convenience, it seems, as he has for his own life, which nothing can save now. He'll give them a run, though, I believe."

"Are not priests forbidden to hunt, Father ?" inquired Monica demurely, as she turned her ponies' heads towards home.

"We are, my dear young lady," answered Monsignor Nolan, who had seated himself opposite to her, "and very properly so. But it does us no harm to see the hounds throw off, and some of us like to note who from amongst our own people is out and who is not. If we know that a man is riding across country we know that he can't get into mischief for a certain number of hours any way, do you see."

"I didn't see Mr. Nigel Scarth," Ethel remarked. "I hope it doesn't follow that he is getting into mischief."

"There was a very good reason for your not seeing him," returned Monsignor Nolan, becoming suddenly

grave. "I doubt Nigel Scarth will never be seen in the hunting field again."

"You don't mean," exclaimed Monica, with a troubled countenance, "that he has gone back to the Abbey!"

The old priest nodded. "I had a telegram this morning. No, don't distress yourself; you are no more to blame than I am. I gave you his message, as you'll remember, and I'll take it upon myself to say that it came from his heart. For that matter, I don't know why anybody should be blamed. When a man has the soul of a monk, it's best for him that he should wear the habit of one."

"Has he the soul of a monk?" asked Monica dubiously.

"I believe he has; but I don't call myself a judge. It is more to the purpose that the Abbot, who is a judge, is of the same opinion. At least, so I gather from his telegram. He doesn't say much in it—only that he thinks I ought to know, and that he approves of the young man's action. That, I take it, means that he is convinced. He wasn't convinced a few weeks ago."

Monica sighed. "How difficult it is to tell!" she murmured, thinking of her own case.

"Not so difficult as you think," returned Monsignor Nolan, laughing and taking snuff. "At all events, it can't be said that Nigel has made up his mind in a hurry; though I admit that his departure looks a little precipitate."

All this time he had been furtively watching Miss Dallison out of the corner of his eye. If he was not a judge of monastic vocations, he was a tolerably shrewd one of his fellow-mortals, and he divined the cause of her sudden pallor. He had already divined her reason for refusing Nigel, and it was easy to guess that if the news of his removal from the scene, which ought to


have delighted her, had filled her with consternation, she must have met with a rebuff from an unanticipated quarter.

She broke silence by asking, in a high, cool tone of voice, as though the subject had no special interest for her: "Can people with landed estates go off like that from one moment to another? I should have thought that all sorts of preliminary arrangements would have to be made."

"Oh, not in this case," answered Monsignor Nolan, enjoying the young lady's discomfiture, while he admired her self-control; "all he has to do, under the late man's will, is to walk out, and there's an end of him. It then devolves upon Mr. Robert Scarth to name the new heir, and, as he can't name himself or one of his sons, the chances are that he will exercise his right of selection in favour of his nephew, young Gretton."

"I suppose he will," said Ethel composedly. "Well, I don't see how he could make a much better choice."

Considering that her hopes and projects had been wrecked, that she more than suspected Monsignor Nolan of having found her out, and that even the innocent Monica was scrutinising her with an air of half-compassionate anxiety, her behaviour was really admirable. That Nigel had escaped her she could scarcely doubt; for although his abrupt flight might be taken as evidence that he dared not trust himself to meet her again, there was small profit to be got out of that knowledge. The doors of monasteries are rigidly closed against female visitors; letters addressed to the inmates of monasteries are opened and read before being delivered; he was as effectually cut off from her as a prisoner in gaol. If she still inwardly affirmed that she was not beaten yet, it was rather because she could not endure to acknowledge defeat than because



she retained any real hope of victory. So she was driven along the muddy roads, beneath the soft, grey sky with a smile upon her lips and a well-nigh intolerable pain in that part of her person which is supposed to be the seat of the affections.

Little thought was the cause and origin of her pain bestowing upon her at the same moment. Little thought, indeed, had Cuthbert Gretton bestowed at any time upon a young woman whose measure he fancied that he had taken, and not very much—if the whole truth must be told—was he bestowing just then even upon one whose coldness threatened to spoil his life for him. Forty minutes, without a check, over a grass country, intersected by brooks and by some uncommonly stiff fences, and then a kill in the open at which only three members of a numerous field have contrived to be present!—it is not every day that such experiences fall to the lot of a keen sportsman, nor is it often in the course of his career that he can expect to be carried as Cuthbert had been that day. No wonder he exclaimed, as he dismounted and contemplated his good horse's heaving flanks, "Well, old man, I don't know what Uncle Robert gave for you, but I know I wouldn't sell you for five hundred sovereigns!"

Not until a quarter of an hour later, by which time the number of equestrians had been considerably increased, did a lady in a very muddy habit and a broken hat appear. She made straight for Cuthbert and asked, in a voice much more friendly than he had heard from her of late:

"Well, were you up?"

He nodded assent. "Yes, thanks to my mount. I simply couldn't help it. After the first quarter of a mile he wanted no riding at all; there was nothing to do except just to let him go."

"You are satisfied with him, then?"

"I should think I was! He's a ripper!"

"That's all right," said Bessie. "I'm glad you like him, for I chose him."

This was gratifying information, and still more gratifying was it to perceive that the exercise or the sport or something had restored to Bessie that good humour which she had lost on Christmas Day and had not hitherto recovered.

"But what happened to you?" Cuthbert inquired. "You look as if you had come to grief."

"Oh, I had a little toss coming over a rotten bank," she answered carelessly. "It wasn't anything; only I had to catch the mare afterwards, which put me out of it."

"And Uncle Robert?"

"I don't know. Gone home, most likely. He complained of feeling seedy on the way to the meet. I wonder which coverts they are going to draw now."

Presently the cousins were jogging along, side by side, in a renewed good-fellowship which would have been entirely delightful to one of them, had he not felt that it augured almost worse for him than the ostentatious indifference of the past two days. He was unwilling to risk giving fresh offence; yet he did not want to seem acquiescent in her treatment of him as a brother who might have caused her annoyance, but who remained, after all, a brother and must be forgiven. So at length, after they had been for some time loitering about outside a covert which evidently held no foxes, he took heart of grace to ask:

"Bessie, have I done anything to offend you?"

She faced him with clear, wide-open eyes. "What a question, when I have just been generously doing all I knew to make friends!" And then, with a laugh,



"Oh, well, I'll be honest and confess that you did rather put my back up by going on as you did with Ethel Dallison after what you had said about her. I thought you might just as well have admitted what you chose to deny ; but I am not going to sulk any more, you will be glad to hear. I can't pretend to like her, you know, and I don't suppose I ever shall ; but—I'm prepared to accept her."

"Then all I can say," returned Cuthbert warmly, "is that you are prepared to do a great deal more than I am ! What you mean by my 'going on' with her I can't imagine ; I can only assure you that I was longing to go off every minute of the time that I spent with her while she was at Knaresby. She knew it, too."

"Did she indeed ?"

"Well, she knew on the last evening, anyhow, for I as good as told her so."

"You never told her that !"

"Do you wish to hear what I told her ?" asked Cuthbert, edging his horse a little nearer to Bessie's. "I think you shall hear, whether you wish it or not ; sooner or later, you *must* hear. I told her what is the simple truth—that I have loved you, and nobody but you, ever since I was a boy, Bessie. I am afraid there isn't the least use in my saying this ; but——"

"Hush !" interrupted Bessie, bending forward in her saddle. "Then, as a faint cry arose from the far side of the covert, 'They're running !' she exclaimed and, touching her mare with her heel, was off like an arrow from a bow."

For the first and last time in his life Cuthbert received that announcement with deep disgust, which was only in part mitigated by the circumstance that the run, for which both he and Bessie got off very badly, proved on this occasion a short one. It was deepened

by the persistency with which she contrived to avoid being left alone with him during the remainder of a day which provided no further sport ; but the longest day must come to an end and the homeward roads of fox-hunters are, fortunately diverse. So at last there came a moment when he was able to remark remonstratingly :

"I have been waiting some time for an answer to my question."

"I didn't know that you had asked me one," was her cool rejoinder.

"You must have known that I expected an answer, though."

She gave him none ; but she looked at him with an expression of countenance in which laughter and tears, humour and pathos, contrition and reproach seemed to be oddly blended. Perhaps he did not see all that in it ; but he saw what he wished to see, which was doubtless enough for him.

"Only I should like to know," he remarked, after sundry incoherent passages which the imagination of every reader can supply, "why on earth you have been going out of your way for ever so long to convince me that you didn't care a hang for me !"

"For the same reason, perhaps," she replied, "that you have been doing your very best to make me betray my jealousy. And the worst of it is that you succeeded, whereas I didn't."

They had a wrangle over this which was not very acrimonious and an explanation so protracted that they probably found it satisfactory. Only when they were within a very short distance of Knaresby did it occur to them to entertain some misgivings as to the spirit in which their betrothal was likely to be regarded by the intractable master of that establishment.

"He won't like it," observed Bessie ; "we may as

well make up our minds to that. Perhaps, indeed, we had better make up our minds that he will begin by forbidding it. He is sure to protest that we haven't money enough and that he disapproves of first cousins' marrying and so forth ; but if we don't say much and stand to our guns, he will give in all of a sudden some day."

"It would be more comfortable if he were to give in at once," Cuthbert remarked.

"Yes ; but it isn't his way to make things comfortable ; though he has the kindest heart in the world really. Without vanity, I believe I can manage him better than most people ; so I daresay it would be advisable for me to break the news to him."

"Well, if you think so," answered Cuthbert, who felt no great confidence in his own capacity for propitiating his uncle.

But it appeared, when they reached Knaresby, that Mr. Scarth was in no condition to be approached by anybody that evening. His wife, who was pouring out tea in the library on their arrival, informed them that she had persuaded him to go to bed, both because he had contracted a slight chill, which had caused him to abandon his day's hunting, and because he had just had an extremely disturbing interview with Mr. Trenchard.

"And now if you tell him that you have had the best run of the season—as of course you have ; I can see it in your faces—there's no knowing what he won't do. Even as it is, I am in terror of his doing something quite preposterous !"

"In what direction ?" asked Bessie. "What has Mr. Trenchard been saying to him ?"

Mrs. Scarth shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, nothing more than might have been expected, I suppose ; still

it is tiresome ! Nigel has fled back to his monastery and locked the door behind him, that's all."

"Definitely locked it ?" inquired Cuthbert.

"So Mr. Trenchard, who appears to be in his confidence, declares. The meaning of it is, no doubt, that Ethel wouldn't have him ; most likely they fell out about religious questions. However, that can't be helped, and it is no business of ours. What is our business, unfortunately, is to provide a substitute for him at Rixmouth, and I leave you to imagine the state of fuss that your uncle is in !"

Cuthbert presumed that there was no need for immediate action ; but his aunt assured him that, whether needed or not, it was pretty certain to be taken.

"You know what Robert is ; it is always his impulse to do things first and then justify them, if he can—or even if he can't. To tell you the truth, that is just why I didn't want you to see him tonight. It seems to me that you may stand a rather better chance by not seeing him."

Cuthbert did not request her to explain her meaning, which indeed he understood well enough ; but he said to himself that he must in common honesty see his uncle the next morning. It was scarcely probable that he would be nominated to succeed Nigel ; still such an event might happen, and it was therefore obligatory upon him to conceal nothing from a man who might easily suspect him afterwards of having kept silence from interested motives. Presently he took occasion to say in a low voice to Bessie :

"I call this rather bad luck."

"So do I," she returned ; "but I doubt whether Mr. Trenchard does."

CHAPTER XXII

OLD HUMPHRY HAS A PLEASANT DAY

IT was Mr. Trenchard's custom to have his letters and the morning paper read to him after breakfast, and on the second day of his residence at Rixmouth Castle he had been made comfortable before the fire for that purpose by his careful attendant when he said :

"By the way, Bailey, has there been any talk amongst the servants here about their master's absence?"

"Well, sir," replied the man, "some remarks have been passed, as was only to be expected; but I don't think anybody guesses the truth, and of course nobody has had a hint from me."

Old Humphry nodded. "Quite right; it is best that we should keep our own counsel for the present. I dislike concealment and deception; still, until we know for certain that Mr. Nigel will not return, we must be careful to say nothing which might cause him possible annoyance hereafter."

"Just so, sir; and I hope the young gentleman will think better of his fancy."

"You cannot hope that more earnestly than I do, Bailey. Now will you open these letters and read them to me, please."

It was a whim of his that his correspondence should be delivered to him in the first instance unopened, and it was one of his mysterious faculties to discover or

guess as often as not who his correspondents were. On this occasion his attendant, after communicating to him the contents of sundry rather uninteresting missives, ventured to observe :

"I believe there was another letter, sir."

"There was," answered old Humphry blandly ; "I have it in my pocket. It is from Mr. Nigel, unless I am mistaken. Perhaps you know that it is."

"I thought I recognised the handwriting, sir."

"Yes—well, it is inevitable of course that you should be in my confidence, Bailey, and, as you know, I have the most implicit confidence in you. At the same time, I think I will ask Mr. Scarth, whom I expect here in the course of the morning, to read that letter to me. There may be allusions in it to family matters which I should have no right to divulge, you see."

The man shot a suspicious and not very benevolent glance at his employer ; for he was inquisitive, and there were circumstances connected with Nigel's dramatic exit which remained tantalisingly obscure to him. However, as he was in the enjoyment of a high salary, and as he knew better than to question his master's orders, he said no more, but proceeded to his next duty, which was to read the newspaper aloud. This he discharged, as usual, in a sing-song, unpunctuated style which would have enraged a less patient listener, wondering all the time how the dickens the old man had managed to find out that a given envelope out of about a dozen came from a particular quarter. It was most amazing, he thought, as well as most exasperating.

He would have been still more amazed and exasperated had he known that Mr. Trenchard had not only opened the said envelope but had mastered every word in the closely-written sheet of note-paper which it covered. Although Bailey's master was capable of giving him, and

had often given him, some sharp shocks of surprise, he would unhesitatingly have pronounced such a feat as that impossible. Which shows that exceptions must be allowed to the truth of every adage and that there are a few heroes who can contrive to withhold some of their titles to admiration, or the reverse, even from their valets.

Old Humphry, with his feet on the fender, his elbows on the arms of his chair and his slim, white fingers interlaced, bore blandly with the latest intelligence and a couple of leading articles, after which he said :

"Thank you, Bailey, that will do. I shall not require you any more for the present. Show Mr. Scarth in here when he comes."

He knew that Robert Scarth would turn up soon, although the latter had made no appointment with him ; for he knew that Robert must have received, that morning, a letter similar to the one which was in his own pocket and which he had so inexplicably deciphered. He likewise knew that Robert would be a good deal more upset than he himself had been by Nigel's communication, and he smiled a little in anticipation of the coming interview. What he had heard from the determined recluse of Lew Abbey was, in his correspondent's own words, that the Rubicon had now been crossed.

"No imaginable remonstrance or pressure," Nigel wrote, "could induce me even to think of returning to the world, and I trust that none will be attempted. I may say that I am, for all worldly intents and purposes, dead ; so it only remains for those who survive me to dispose of what I have left as the law directs. Their task will, of course, be simple with regard to house and lands ; I am not quite sure about some small personal belongings and cash at the bank, but I am writing to Mr. Linklater upon the subject. I have written also to Uncle Robert and have made a suggestion to him

respecting my successor which may or may not influence his choice. To you, my dear Mr. Trenchard, I can only express the warmest gratitude for all your patience and kindness and for your invaluable help to me during the time that I was trying to fit myself into an impossible position. I am afraid I can no more make you understand why it was essentially impossible than I can hope to convince you that my present position is one of unmixed happiness; but you will believe, perhaps, that the only thing to which I can look back with any approach to satisfaction is your admirable management of matters which would have been grievously mismanaged, had you not been at my side when it devolved upon me to deal with them. I should wish, for the sake of the estate and those residing upon it, that it might pass into your very able hands, only I doubt whether such an arrangement would be welcome to you."

His doubts would not have been shared by anyone acquainted with the secrets of Humphry Trenchard's mind and life; but there was only one person in existence who answered to that description—namely, old Humphry himself—and he was rather a good hand at keeping a secret. He certainly did not betray it by word or look when, shortly after midday, his expected visitor was announced.

"Well, my dear Robert," he began, "how are you this morning? Better, I hope, and more at ease than you were yesterday afternoon. And do you bring me any fresh news? I myself have a letter from Nigel here which I will ask you to be so kind as to read to me presently. I thought it might be better not to let Bailey see it, trustworthy though he is."

Mr. Scarth replied in a gruff voice that he was not at all better—rather worse. "I couldn't stay indoors,

though ; it was imperative upon me to see you and consult you about the very unpleasant quandary in which Nigel and others have thought fit to land me. I heard from the young man this morning, and I cannot say that he writes like a lunatic, although in my opinion he has acted like one. In any case, his meaning is quite unambiguous. He formally resigns the inheritance and tells me that he has written to Linklater in identical terms. He adds that his decision is irrevocable, and he is then kind enough to give me a helping hand in my difficulties by proposing that I should nominate Cuthbert Gretton to fill his vacant place."

Mr. Trenchard nodded approvingly. "There I am entirely with him. You couldn't make a wiser or a more natural selection, Robert."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" returned Mr. Scarth, with a harsh laugh ; "I was prepared to hear that you did. Well, I am sorry that I am compelled to take a diametrically contrary view."

"I can't for the life of me comprehend why you should ; but you must talk it over with Linklater and others. After all, there is no immediate hurry."

"Excuse me ; there is hurry. Rixmouth cannot be left without an owner, and, for more reasons than one, the question of ownership ought to be settled without delay. As for your not comprehending why it is impossible for me to appoint Cuthbert—do you recollect a conversation that we had upon this subject not long ago?"

"Perfectly well."

"Then you will remember putting a hypothetical case to me which, I regret to tell you, has become a reality. As if I had not troubles enough already, my daughter Bessie and Cuthbert came to me this morning to ask for my consent to their engagement!"

"Which I hope and trust that you gave, Robert?"

Mr. Scarth, who had not yet sat down, walked to the window and back again before replying, in a somewhat argumentative tone: "I have not receded in any way whatever from my position with regard to marriages between first cousins; I still think them objectionable from many points of view—I might almost say from every point of view. At the same time I desire, as I hope I always do, to be fair. When Cuthbert pleads that he cannot help being the son of my wife's sister, and also that he cannot help loving my daughter, I am bound, it seems to me, to admit that he cannot."

Mr. Trenchard made a gesture of agreement.

"Again, when he represents that he is already making a little money and that he has reasonable prospects of soon earning a sufficient income, I hardly see how I can contradict him."

"Nor do I."

"I think, then, that anyone who calls me inconsistent in this matter brings a charge which the facts do not sustain."

"Nobody who was acquainted with you would dream of making such an accusation. Well, I am very glad that you have yielded, Robert, very glad indeed, and I am sure you will never regret having done so. May I now put forward my own humble claim to consistency by imploring you to name your future son-in-law as the owner of this place?"

"You might as well," Mr. Scarth declared, "implore me to commit a burglary. Cuthbert, I am glad to say, feels quite as strongly as I do that his candidature is out of the question. I should have been surprised and disappointed if he had thought otherwise; for, say what you will, Cuthbert is a gentleman and an honest man."

"Have I ever said that he was anything else?" asked Mr. Trenchard, laughing. "His scruples are an unneeded proof of his being both; yet there is no getting away from the fact that he is your natural nominee. Does it not also seem natural and right that Nigel's wishes should be taken into account?"

"Not to me," answered Mr. Scarth. "Nigel is not a testator; I look upon him rather as a deserter, and that he should express any wish at all strikes me as something of an impertinence. Does he ask you to recommend Cuthbert?"

"I shall be glad if you will tell me what he says," replied old Humphry, drawing Nigel's letter from his pocket and handing it to his friend, who proceeded to read aloud the missive which has already been quoted, and who remarked triumphantly, as he laid it down:

"Well, he is of one mind with me, you see; he states in so many words that he wishes the estate could be transferred to you."

"But, according to you, Robert, that is impertinent of him. He adds, moreover, that such an arrangement would be unwelcome to me, as I need scarcely assure you that it would be. I hoped you had dismissed that fanciful project from your mind."

"The project is not a fanciful one," returned Mr. Scarth doggedly, "and I am so far from having dismissed it from my mind that I intend to carry it into effect forthwith. It is a question of duty, not of your wishes or mine."

"Then, at the risk of affronting you, Robert, and at the risk of appearing ungrateful, I must say that I think you will be guilty of a grave dereliction of duty by acting as you propose."

To use language of that sort to Robert Scarth was

very much like pulling at a horse who has taken the bit between his teeth. He said :

"I can but act in accordance with what I believe to be my duty, and that is what I shall do. Please do not waste time by trying to dissuade me. My mind is made up."

"I have not known you for so many years, Robert," sighed Mr. Trenchard, "without knowing that it is indeed a waste of time to attempt to divert you from any purpose upon which you are bent ; but surely there is nothing unreasonable in begging you at least to wait a little longer before you thrust this unsought and undesired burden upon me."

"I can't wait," returned Mr. Scarth impatiently ; "I have no right to wait. What if I were to drop down dead tomorrow?"

"Really," said his friend, smiling, "I think we may venture to take that risk."

"You would not say so if it were a question of making my will. No man ought to put off an important duty because he believes himself to be in good health, and, as a matter of fact, I am by no means in good health just now. I turned so faint yesterday, all of a sudden, that I nearly fell off my horse and had to go home. That is one reason why I shall execute a formal appointment this evening and have my signature properly attested. I have telegraphed for Linklater, who is coming down and who will see that the document is worded as it should be."

There was nothing in Mr. Trenchard's concerned and rather pained expression to indicate that this was highly satisfactory hearing to him. His only remark was :

"Of course I agree that it is unwise to put off testamentary or other dispositions which may be of importance ; if I advocate delay in this instance, it is

because I cannot help thinking the proposed dispositions deplorable. But there is little use, I fear, in repeating that."

"None at all. I am bound to obey my brother's injunctions at once by nominating somebody as his heir. Cuthbert is ineligible, and I do not doubt that I am consulting what would have been poor Tom's wishes, as well as my own, by naming you. One comfort is that the appointment will be a thoroughly popular one with the tenants on the estate."

Old Humphry had every reason to believe that it would. Like the unjust steward, although by methods less glaringly compromising, he had for years been making for himself friends amongst the Rixmouth tenantry, and he had on many occasions had their own word for it that he had not laboured in vain. For many years, too, the one great longing and ambition of his life had been to rule over them as their rightful lord and master. That he meant to be a considerate and benevolent master is perhaps only another way of saying that he wished to increase the revenues of the estate, which in old Tom's time had been brought lower than there was any need for them to be by perversity, obstinacy and mismanagement. During Nigel's short reign some essential, but necessarily unpopular, improvements had been effected, for which Mr. Trenchard had taken very good care not to appear answerable, although he hoped to profit by them. For the rest, he was scarcely conscious of having played a Macchiavellian part. He would have been surprised, as well as indignant, if anybody had asserted that he had striven long and patiently to widen, for his own advantage, the breach between two irascible brothers, that Tom's will had been a grievous disappointment to him, and that his aim since Nigel's accession had been to disgust the young man

with his inheritance and with the world. Humphry Trenchard, an adept at deceiving others, was no bad hand at deceiving himself, and indeed it was a plausible enough belief on his part that by getting his own way he would promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number. He did not, however, carry self-deception so far as to affect in privacy the regret which he had exhibited in Robert Scarth's presence, and after the latter had left him, he rubbed his hands softly, while a bland smile overspread his features.

"Post tot naufragia!" he murmured.

He rang for Bailey and said that he would go out for a drive immediately after luncheon. His own horses, which were in the stables, were brought round for him at the hour that he named, and he tired them in the course of the afternoon, although he kept, the whole time, within the boundaries of the Rixmouth property. There was hardly a farm that he did not visit; he put quick questions to his attendant respecting gates, fences, roofs and walls; he had a kindly word or two for the men, women and children by whom he was greeted. If there was already in his tone a hint of squirearchical affability, they probably did not notice it, having learnt to look upon him as an intermediary between them and the new young squire who had won neither their hearts nor their confidence. It was dark when he returned to the castle, after having spent one of the most enjoyable afternoons of his whole life. Yet he was old and blind and alone, and his income was sufficient to provide for all his needs.

Mr. Trenchard had a bottle of champagne with his dinner that evening. Was it his champagne or Nigel's? Strictly speaking, it was his host's, he presumed; still he was quite sure that his host (now doubtless being regaled upon pulse and cold water) would wish him to

order anything that he fancied, and he had a fancy for drinking his host's health, as well as Robert Scarth's and Cuthbert Gretton's and his own. In a mood of universal benevolence, he was disposed, like tiny Tim, to exclaim "God bless us all!" It may be that he actually did formulate some such petition on his knees before going to bed; for he was a man of devout habits.

He slept the sleep of the just, and recalled in high good humour, when he awoke in the morning, the events of the previous day. To him, thus serenely occupied, entered Bailey, bearing a tea-tray, and announced, in solemn, lugubrious accents:

"I am very sorry to tell you, sir, that we have had sad news from Knaresby."

"Eh?—what has happened?" asked Mr. Trenchard, alert and alarmed. "Is Mr. Scarth ill?"

"Worse than that, sir," answered the man, shaking his head, "worse than that, unhappily. Mr. Scarth was found dead in his study after dinner last evening."

"Good God!" shrieked old Humphry, starting up in bed.

There was a poignancy of anguish in his voice which was perhaps even greater than the occasion explained; although, to be sure, the dead man had been his most intimate friend. Bailey could not give him many particulars. Failure of the heart was said to have been the cause of death; that was all that an agitated stable-lad, who had ridden over with the news, knew about it. Old Humphry, nevertheless, asked many questions while he was being hastily dressed. To the one question which he was longing to ask, but was of course unable to ask, no answer was to be expected, nor, he was afraid, would any be volunteered by the stricken widow and family to whose house he was, as in duty bound, about to betake himself. Had poor Robert

executed and signed a certain document before his terribly sudden end or not? And supposing that, by a cruel stroke of ill fortune he had not, what then? Well might Mr. Trenchard murmur in a trembling voice to his attendant:

“Things sometimes come to pass in this world, Bailey, which are enough to try the faith of the most convinced Christian!”

CHAPTER XXIII

MR. TRENCHARD SHOWS GREAT PATIENCE

THE blinds at Knaresby were drawn down when Mr. Trenchard's mail phaeton reached the entrance ; the butler who opened the door for him addressed him in a solemn whisper, as servants will at such times, and presently in the semi-darkness of the hall Cuthbert Gretton advanced to meet a visitor whose advent had not been unexpected. Old Humphry was a good deal moved ; he took Cuthbert's hand, pressed it and shook his head several times, but was apparently unable to speak. His words, when at last they came, were broken and faltering.

"Ah, my dear boy, it is too terrible !—I am stunned—paralysed. The best and truest friend that ever man had ! And he was with me, well and strong and clear-headed, only yesterday—only yesterday !"

Now Cuthbert was honestly shocked and grieved at the death of his uncle, who had in the main been kind to him and by whose unforeseen magnanimity in the matter of his engagement he had been greatly touched ; but, either because emotional displays are abhorrent to Englishmen or because he neither liked nor trusted old Humphry, he answered somewhat curtly :

"Yes, it is a very sudden blow to us all. I am sure you will understand that my aunt does not feel equal to seeing you."

"Indeed I do, poor woman!" Mr. Trenchard promptly declared; "I would not for the world intrude upon her in her sorrow. It is selfish of me, I know; but for the moment I have no power to think of anything but my own."


Cuthbert conducted him into the library and, at his request, furnished him with details respecting the calamity which had befallen him and others. His uncle, he said, had complained during dinner of feeling tired and unwell, but had seemed better afterwards.

"He talked for some time about matters of business to me and to Mr. Linklater, who, as perhaps you know, had arrived in the afternoon. It was about half past ten, I think, when we left him in his study, and rather more than an hour later Johnson, the butler, came to tell us that he had found his master in a dead faint. At first when we saw him we hoped it might be only a faint; but long before the doctor came we knew that all was over. He must have died, the doctor said, almost immediately after we left him, and there is every reason to hope that he died without pain."

"Poor Robert!" sighed Mr. Trenchard; "he has been fortunate in the manner of his death, if not in the time of its occurrence. His earthly task, one cannot help feeling, has been left uncompleted. Responsibilities have been thrown upon him recently which, I know, caused him considerable anxiety and about which he consulted me yesterday. He can hardly have had time, I suppose, to discharge them in the way that he proposed to do and which I must confess that I did not personally approve. Perhaps, however, that may be almost as well."

"Perhaps so," agreed Cuthbert, tacitly and exasperatingly declining to be pumped.

Mr. Trenchard was not so clumsy as to insist. He



made a few further inquiries as to what had taken place during his friend's last hours of life and finally said :

"Take me into his study, Cuthbert, will you? It is a silly fancy, no doubt, but I should like to say good-bye to him there. We have had so many talks in that room, he and I."

Mr. Scarth's study had presumably been visited by the housemaids that morning, but they may have been told not to put it in order ; for the writing-table remained littered with papers and a bunch of keys was still sticking in one of the half-opened drawers. Towards the chair in which the body of the late master of the house had been found old Humphry felt his way with unerring instinct. He seated himself, dropped his elbows upon the table and silently buried his face in his hands.

"Leave me for a quarter of an hour, my dear boy," said he presently in a stifled voice ; "I am more upset than I ought to be. But I shall pull myself together after I have been alone for awhile."

Cuthbert, who indeed could scarcely do otherwise, retired without a word, and no sooner had he left the room than old Humphry pulled off his coloured spectacles and affixed to his left eye a single glass, by the aid of which he hastily scrutinised the papers before him. He could not see very well with this lens, which the German specialist, who had restored a measure of dim vision to him, had warned him to use sparingly ; still it enabled him from time to time to test the trustworthiness of Bailey, and it sufficed now to convince him that not one of the documents which he hurriedly examined was a deed of appointment. He knew, to be sure, that such a deed, if in existence, was almost certain to have been witnessed by Mr. Linklater and to be in that gentleman's keeping ; yet so great was his anxiety that he could not resist the temptation to make a personal

search. Although this proved fruitless, and although Cuthbert had told him nothing, he did not despair. Cuthbert's deliberate reticence was no bad sign, he thought, and he was pondering the question of whether it would be wise or not to ask for a few words with Linklater when the door was opened suddenly and gave admission to Bessie Scarth. Old Humphry started, dropping the paper which he had been holding in his hand and dropping also the glass from his eye. Perhaps he had been caught, or perhaps he had not ; in any case, he did not lose his presence of mind.

"Who is it ?" he asked, dexterously slipping the glass into his waistcoat pocket and turning a careworn profile towards the intruder. And when Bessie had announced herself, "Ah, my poor child," he moaned, "I know so little what to say to you that it seems as if I had better keep silence. He was very dear to us both and our loss is irreparable ; yet—you are young, while I am old. Life, thank God, must in the nature of things have many consolations still to offer to you ; but for me it can have none. Well, well ! repinings and condolences are alike vain ; I won't persist with either and I won't distress you by my presence any longer. If you will kindly touch the bell, my servant will come and take me away. I wanted, just for a few minutes, to be by myself in the room where your poor, dear father breathed his last, and you, I daresay, have the same wish."

Whatever may have been Bessie's feelings—and, as a matter of fact, Robert Scarth was mourned by no human being more deeply than by his daughter—she did not care to expatiate upon them to Mr. Trenchard, and it was in a steady, rather cold voice that she replied :

"I came to look for my father's keys, which are wanted. I believe they were left here."

Old Humphry held them up. "My blind man's fingers detected them at once," he said. "There is a pathos about inanimate things—but why should I emphasise it? True to his duty, true to the work that he had to accomplish, up to the very last! All these scattered documents that I can feel are so many mute witnesses. Now, my dear, I must leave you. My kindest regards to your dear mother, please, and my most heart-felt sympathy. I do not know whether I can be of any use to her in any way, however trifling?"

"I don't think so, thank you, Mr. Trenchard," answered Bessie. "Mr. Linklater is here, as well as the boys and Cuthbert."

"Yes, yes," agreed Mr. Trenchard, with a faint, kindly smile; "I know what a help and comfort Cuthbert must be to her. May I venture to add how glad I am that Cuthbert is to be a permanent help and comfort to you, my dear?"

As Cuthbert himself came in at this juncture, his betrothed was dispensed from acknowledging delicate felicitations, and in a few minutes their visitor withdrew, leaning upon the arm of his attendant, who had been summoned at his request.

"Cuthbert," said Bessie, after they had seen the old man drive rapidly away, "do you know that I have made a discovery about Mr. Trenchard. He isn't blind at all. When I came into the room he was reading father's papers through a magnifying glass."

"That," observed Cuthbert, "doesn't astonish me; I have had my suspicions more than once. Well, I don't suppose he has found out much to interest him."

"But what did he expect to find?"

Cuthbert shrugged his shoulders. "I think I can guess; but it doesn't matter. We have got rid of him, anyhow."

Old Humphry, as he drove back towards the house which might or might not be his, was half afraid that they had. Only half afraid; for Robert must surely have said something about the proposed appointment before his death, even if he had not executed it, and there had been a perceptible, if subdued, hostility in Cuthbert's manner and Bessie's which was of favourable augury. Nevertheless, some days of agonising suspense seemed to be inevitable.

He spent them in a condition of inward turmoil and alternate hope and despair which his serene exterior most creditably concealed. Never until now had he known how intensely he had longed for years to hold Rixmouth for his very own. There had been a chance that old Tom would leave the place to him; but it had not been much of a chance, nor had he been greatly dismayed on learning that Nigel had decided to take up a difficult inheritance. From that moment, however, he had felt practically assured of his quarry; it had appeared to him a simple enough task to drive the young man back to the cloister, and the final move, as he was well aware, would follow without any help from him. There was, alas! a horrible, excruciating possibility that it had not followed, and when old Humphry thought of this he ground his teeth, which were remarkably sound and strong for his age.

On the day before that appointed for the funeral he returned to his own house, deeming it more decent and fitting to do so, and thence he at length set forth, arrayed in deepest black, to pay the last tribute of respect to his deceased friend, as well as to hear what could no longer be kept secret.

To the very large concourse of neighbours whom the same pious purpose had drawn to Knaresby the blind old man, walking with bent head behind the chief

mourners, was a touching spectacle. Well known to everybody was the affection which that rather surly and cross-grained specimen of humanity Robert Scarth had entertained for one whom he had always regarded as the victim of his criminal carelessness ; well known also was it that that affection had been most warmly reciprocated. No doubt it crossed the minds of many who watched poor old Humphry, as he stood beside the open grave which he could not see, that he must be wondering when his own turn would come and perhaps wishing that it might come soon.

But it was with hopes and speculations of quite another kind that Mr. Trenchard was preoccupied. He was beyond question the most excited, although he looked the most placid, of those who, after the obsequies, came together in the library at Knaresby to hear Robert Scarth's will read by Mr. Linklater, and indeed that document proved to be altogether commonplace and uninteresting. Mr. Trenchard was nominated therein as one of his deceased friend's executors and a small sum of money was bequeathed to him ; but neither of these announcements gave him any pleasure. When it became apparent that no further announcement was going to be made, he could not refrain from saying to Cuthbert, who sat beside him :

"I happen to know that just before his death your dear uncle was most desirous of putting on record his decision respecting the Rixmouth property. So desirous, in fact, that I could not persuade him to take even another day for consideration. He left me with the expressed determination of at once executing a deed of appointment and, strangely enough, he even gave as a reason against delay the possibility of his sudden death."

"Yes ; so he told us," answered Cuthbert tranquilly. "I was expecting every minute a summons to witness

his signature when Johnson came to tell us what had happened."

"Ah!—his intentions were frustrated, then?"

"I presume so. Or rather, I know they must have been."

Humphry Trenchard was really a courageous man, as well as a fine actor. He remarked:

"I can't regret it. Convinced though I was that his motives were thoroughly conscientious, I was obliged to oppose him as strongly as possible in the matter, and I still feel that almost any solution would be preferable to the one upon which he set his heart, poor fellow! By the way, what happens, now that his right of nomination has lapsed?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Cuthbert truthfully replied, thereby arousing the reluctant admiration of his questioner; "you had better ask Mr. Linklater, who probably knows all about it."

Mr. Linklater, on being interrogated, said that the late Mr. Thomas Scarth's will provided quite clearly for the contingency which had arisen.

"Failing any appointment by his uncle Robert, our young friend at Lew Abbey is empowered to nominate a substitute for himself, provided only that he must not put in a Roman Catholic. It is a rather curious state of things; but his right is beyond dispute."

"One can but hope," observed Mr. Trenchard, "that he will exercise his right wisely. I am inclined to think that he will; for he was genuinely anxious throughout to do the best he could for the estate, even if some of the measures which he adopted were not wholly judicious."

A few minutes later Mr. Trenchard left the house, and as soon as he had departed, Cuthbert said to Mr. Linklater, with a smile: "What is the betting about his sleeping at Lew Abbey tonight?"

"I don't think he can," answered the lawyer ; "but it would not surprise me to find him there tomorrow, nor would it surprise me to find that he had carried the position by storm. It isn't a very well defended position, you see, and he has your uncle's undeniable wish to back him up. I am afraid that, upon the whole, you had better not be sanguine."

"I have never for a moment expected to be named either by him or by anybody else," Cuthbert declared ; "I shouldn't have thought of such a thing as possible if Uncle Robert hadn't spoken of it. Why, after all, should Nigel name me ?"

"Only because there isn't anybody else," answered Mr. Linklater, laughing. "He will have to choose between you and old Trenchard, and I don't mind telling you that, if I am consulted, I shall strongly recommend him to choose you. The chances, however, are rather against my being consulted. Of course I wrote to him, as it was my duty to do, and the only answer I got was a short note from the Abbot, informing me that I should be permitted to see Brother Anselm at any time that I might be pleased to name. Old Trenchard also, you may depend upon it, will be granted access to Brother Anselm and will know how to make use of his opportunities. A crafty old schemer, that ; but he has no near relations and he cannot have very many more years to live. It would be interesting to get a peep at his will."

Mr. Trenchard had it in contemplation to make a new will. It has already been mentioned that he entertained quite a comfortable appreciation of his own rectitude, and he deemed it only fair and just that Rixmouth should pass, at his death, to Robert Scarth's eldest son. Very pleasant was it to him to reflect, as he drove rapidly away from Knaresby, that he had a

good chance of being able to perform that act of reparation. Whether Nigel was precluded or not from performing it he was uncertain, and he wished that he had thought of questioning Mr. Linklater upon the point; but it was, after all, one of small importance; for he felt pretty confident that he himself would be Nigel's nominee. The long days of suspense through which he had passed and the shock which he had sustained earlier in the afternoon had been succeeded by a return of hope and glee; it seemed to him that he had no serious competitor to dread. There was Cuthbert Gretton, to be sure; but Cuthbert had virtually bound himself by a self-denying ordinance which he was too honest a man to repudiate. It was really very fortunate that Cuthbert happened to be an honest man, in addition to being a somewhat bad-mannered one.

"He exulted over me," mused old Humphry; "I could hear that in his voice, though he gave me so few chances of hearing his voice. Well, if he is a dog in the manger—as I fancy that he is—he may find that those who laugh last laugh longest yet."

"Gentleman on the off side, sir," said Bailey suddenly.

Mr. Trenchard pulled up, raising his elbow in token of greeting, and was accosted by Monsignor Nolan, who said:

"You are returning from the funeral, no doubt; I had hoped to be present, but was prevented. Might I speak to you for one moment in private?"

"By all means, if you will kindly give me the guidance of your arm," answered the other, descending to the ground. "Trot quietly on, Bailey, and we will follow you." Then, after listening for a second, "You also are on wheels," he remarked to his companion.

"Yes; I was called away to visit a dying man, and his lordship gave me the loan of a dogcart. What I

wanted to ask you, Mr. Trenchard, was whether a new owner has been named for Rixmouth Castle or not."

Mr. Trenchard shook his head. "My poor friend's very sudden end came before he had time to make any appointment. I hardly know whether to be glad or sorry that he was unable to carry out intentions about which he spoke to me only a few hours before his death."

"H'm! maybe that would depend a little upon what his intentions were. I understood that no appointment had been made; but I wished to be sure. For the right of nomination now passes to Nigel, you see."

"You have the whole legal situation at your fingers' ends, I observe."

"Why wouldn't I? It was important to me to be correctly informed, and it isn't unlikely that Nigel will consult me—just as Mr. Scarth consulted you."

"I am sure that the poor dear fellow could not have a more trustworthy counsellor," Mr. Trenchard declared, with much urbanity. Then on a sudden a disagreeable notion flashed across his mind, and he said, in a voice somewhat less suave: "I believe that members of religious orders resign, on taking their vows, all property or rights which may subsequently accrue to them. How would the present case be affected by that rule?"

Monsignor Nolan laughed. "Did you think we would be converting Rixmouth Castle into a monastery?" he asked. "Be easy; there's no fear. For one thing, Nigel can't have taken any vows at all yet, and, for another, if we wanted to get behind Mr. Thomas Scarth's will, we couldn't. No; the Protestant succession is assured, and all we have to do is to hit upon a deserving Protestant."

"All I have to do," mused old Humphry, "is to get to Lew Abbey before you do." And he might as well have said this aloud; for the priest read his thoughts without any difficulty. What he did say was, "I can

but hope that Nigel will make a wise selection." And then, "You are on your way back to Lannowe, I presume?"

"Indeed I am not," Monsignor Nolan answered; "I'm on my way to the station, worse luck, and I'll hardly get back under a week or ten days. I have to attend a conference at Birmingham, after which I am to go on to London, I believe. We priests must obey orders, whether it's convenient to us or not."

It was eminently convenient to old Humphry that the orders alluded to should have been issued; but he professed to regret them very sincerely.

"Your being engaged elsewhere at this particular time may deprive Nigel of advice which would be of the greatest service to him, I fear," said he. "Still, of course there is the post."

"There is," agreed Monsignor Nolan cheerfully. "I'll advise him to the best of my ability, you may be sure, and I don't doubt but you'll do the same, Mr. Trenchard. Now I must wish you goodbye; for I've no time to lose."

"I want to drive round by the post-office, Bailey," Mr. Trenchard said, after he had resumed his seat and the reins; "I have a telegram to send."

This despatch, which was dictated to his attendant and addressed to Brother Anselm at Lew Abbey, was brief and to the point. "Will be with you tomorrow evening. Take no step until we have met."

A mere measure of precaution, probably superfluous, old Humphry thought; still it is never wise to neglect precautions in dealing with priests.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSIVE

IT was a little annoying to Mr. Trenchard to be cheerfully hailed by Lord Lannowe when he stepped on to the platform of the railway station at an early hour the next morning. But it was, after all, only a little annoying, and he knew better than to make any secret of the destination for which he was bound.

"A final remonstrance?" asked Lord Lannowe. "It has a poor prospect of success, I am afraid, from what Nolan tells me. Well, a genuine vocation is not a thing to be refused, you know. Or perhaps I ought rather to say that we know it, although you may not. At the same time it does seem rather a pity that such a fine property should be going a-begging. Have you any idea who is to get it?"

Mr. Trenchard shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "That is precisely one of the points upon which I hope that my visit to Lew Abbey may throw some light," he answered; "I cannot say that I am very sanguine of persuading Nigel to come back to this world's cares and responsibilities. You are travelling up to London, I presume?"


"Oh, I am not travelling anywhere, I am glad to say," answered Lord Lannowe; "I am only here to see the last of our visitor Miss Dallison, who is obliged to return to her people and who is exchanging embraces

with Monica a few yards away. She will be your fellow-passenger as far as York, where your route and hers diverge."

Mr. Trenchard amiably declared that he should consider himself fortunate to be Miss Dallison's fellow-passenger even for a short distance; but perhaps she entertained other sentiments, for when the train came in, she selected a compartment remote from that into which he was assisted. What old Humphry, of course, could not see, and what Bailey, who did see it, omitted to mention to him, was that Miss Dallison changed into the Bristol train at York, instead of continuing her journey by the London express. Bailey did not feel obliged or inclined to tell everything to his master, who had sundry concealments from him; so, being of a somewhat cynical temperament, he kept to himself a circumstance which appeared to hold out promise of subsequent sport. And the promise became converted into a practical certainty late in the day, when Miss Dallison took her place, at Bristol, in the train bound for the sleepy little western town near which Lew Abbey is situated.

"She *is* a cool hand, dashed if she isn't!" said Bailey admiringly to himself. "Must know that I've spotted her, too, and that she'll have to fight the governor presently. It's six to four against her, I should say, or a shade more than that; but there ought to be a very pretty turn-up, all the same."

Bailey, thoroughly cognizant of all the issues at stake, was upon the whole an impartial looker-on. There was the probability of his wages being raised (he had, indeed, decided to ask for a rise) on his master's impending access of fortune; but then again he would greatly enjoy seeing his master get a nasty fall. For he had that animosity against old Humphry which it is



human to harbour towards those who are at once dependent upon us, generous to us and capable of cracking the whip over our heads. Consequently, he chuckled, as he seated himself in the hired vehicle which had been ordered by telegram to await the arrival of the train at the small country town aforesaid, and it was a rather foolish thing to chuckle within earshot of old Humphry, who at once said :

“ Kindly tell me what the joke is, Bailey.”

“ Most singular, antiquated trap, sir,” answered the man, with commendable promptitude. “ Queer old scarecrow of a driver, too.”

“ I have no doubt that both are exquisitely comical,” returned Mr. Trenchard ; “ but I doubt whether you were laughing at either, Bailey. Probably you were laughing at me—which indeed you have some excuse for doing. I am here on a vain mission, I shall hardly prevail upon Mr. Nigel to quit the monastery a second time. Nevertheless, it is my duty to try.”

Although he knew that his servant’s merriment was not due to the cause that he had named, he felt no great curiosity to ascertain what had provoked it. He himself would have been more amused than alarmed, had he been made acquainted with the strange circumstance that Ethel Dallison was at that moment searching for a vehicle in which to follow on his track. Ethel had for a short time been a help to him and for a shorter time something of a hindrance ; but she had shot her bolt ; she was no longer worthy of being taken into account, one way or the other.

How much more highly the young lady estimated her own powers may be gathered from her having not only decided upon the audacious step of journeying down to the west in order to obtain speech of Nigel Scarth but persevered with her project even after she

had been dismayed by the sight of her fellow-traveller. In for a penny in for a pound, she thought. She must either succeed or fail. In the former event she would be able to snap her fingers at old Humphry ; in the latter nothing that he could say or do would be likely to add much to her discomfiture. Meanwhile, she had to transport herself and her belongings to a small hotel and wait until a fly could be got ready for her.

As for Mr. Trenchard, he reached his goal in the misty twilight of a soft winter evening and was, after some delay, shown into the presence of the Lord Abbot, who was courteous, but not communicative. His telegram had been received, he was told, and he could certainly see Brother Anselm. Oh, yes ; news of Mr. Robert Scarth's death had reached the Abbey, and its consequences in their relation to his nephew were quite understood. The Abbot, however, must beg to be excused from offering any opinion or advice upon the subject, inasmuch as he did not feel qualified to do so.

"I may perhaps consider myself so far qualified," observed old Humphry pensively, "that my poor friend confided his wishes and intentions to me on the very day of his death."

"Yes?" said the Abbot, with a politely detached air.

"Yes. I may tell you that they surprised me and that I deprecated them ; yet it seems almost a duty to impart them to Nigel, who is so very suddenly and unexpectedly called upon to replace his uncle. His uncle's wishes are in no way binding upon him, of course ; only he ought perhaps to be told what they were."

"He is waiting to be told anything that you may have to tell him, sir," answered the Abbot, touching a hand-bell which stood upon the table before him.

In a few minutes Brother Anselm, arrayed in his black habit, appeared, and as he entered, the Abbot

noiselessly left the room. Not so noiselessly, however, but that his exit was detected by the sharp ears of old Humphry, who exclaimed :

"My dear boy, you can't think how this decision of yours has grieved me! But it is quite irrevocable, I suppose?"

"Absolutely," answered Brother Anselm, who was standing, with folded hands, in front of his blind friend and was surveying him with an expression of countenance partly wondering, partly pained, not in the least respectful. He had, as a matter of fact, received an enlightening letter from Mr. Linklater.

"Ah!" sighed old Humphry. "And you are really happy in this life?—happier than you would have been if you had remained at Rixmouth, as I so earnestly hoped that you would?"

"So infinitely happier," replied the other, "that I should despair of making you or any Protestant understand what I mean. But I don't think that you came here with a view to shaking my determination, did you?"

Mr. Trenchard shook his head and smiled rather sadly. "Alas! no; if I am not acquainted with the Scarth character and temperament, who should be? Frankly, my motives for undertaking the journey were those at which I hinted in my telegram, and which you have doubtless guessed. Poor, dear Robert's death casts a responsibility of choice upon you which neither you nor I anticipated, and I am in fear of your exercising it hastily—perhaps unwisely."

"I thought very likely you would be."

"I confess that I am, dear boy. Are you sitting down? I feel, somehow, as if you were a long way off. Draw your chair up, and let us talk it all over quietly. Now, I need not tell you that I have a peculiar sentiment—a fad, if you like—about the Rixmouth property.

To me, as a necessarily solitary old man, it has come to replace wife and children, and it would be the last of the many sorrows which have overtaken me lately if it were to be handed over to some extravagant or incapable owner."

"That," observed Brother Anselm tranquilly, "will not happen."

"I rejoice to hear you say that it will not. Is your selection already made, then?"

"Oh, yes; it was made the moment I heard that, in consequence of Uncle Robert's death, I could give effect to the suggestion of which I told you in my letter. Cuthbert was so plainly indicated that there was no room for hesitation."

Mr. Trenchard, who had been quite prepared for this announcement, nodded reflectively. "One would be disposed to say so," he agreed. "In fact I did say so very forcibly to your uncle only a few hours before he was taken from us, and although it may be true that Cuthbert is without the requisite knowledge and experience, I am still of opinion that he is the most natural and suitable person for you to appoint. But it is only right to tell you that my poor friend scouted the idea of appointing him and was inflexibly determined upon naming somebody else. I may add that he was upon the very brink of doing this formally when death overtook him."

"So I understand from Mr. Linklater. But I don't think that matters much."

"Ah, Nigel, it is not like you—I had almost said it is not like a gentleman or a Christian—to profess such sentiments. To my mind, and to yours also, I feel sure, the wishes of the dead have a peculiar sanctity. We may argue and dispute with the living; but those whom we have loved and who have loved us must be allowed

to have their own way when the power to insist upon it has been taken from them."

"I don't think so," answered the young monk quietly ; "I think, on the contrary, that if the departed know what is taking place here, they must often be thankful to see their unwise wishes disregarded. It was an unwise and unnecessary scruple that deterred Uncle Robert from nominating his nephew and his future son-in-law ; but he would see now, and I suppose he would have seen during his lifetime, that I am completely free to do what he shrank from doing."

Mr. Trenchard made a vigorous gesture of dissent. "Of course you are free, and of course he would acknowledge it. But you were little acquainted with poor Robert if you imagine that he would ever, alive or dead, have approved of the action that you propose to take."

A faint smile flickered over the face of Brother Anselm, who rejoined : "I am acquainted, at any rate, with the action that Uncle Robert proposed to take, and what you have frequently said to me leaves me in no doubt that such action would have been most unwelcome and painful to you. It seems to me providential that circumstances enable me to relieve you of an irksome task and to comply with the advice which you yourself gave to my uncle."

Old Humphry wiped his forehead, which had on a sudden become damp and cold. He knew, from the young man's tone, that the tactics with which he had started were useless, and he said :

"Nigel, these people have been poisoning your mind against me !"

"What people ?" inquired the other. "My advisers are people who have nothing to gain or to lose in this business, nor any desire except that I should do what is right and just. That is what you yourself always

professed to desire, Mr. Trenchard, when I was in the world and when you were my chief adviser respecting worldly matters. I prefer to believe that you have not changed. In any case, Cuthbert Gretton is to have the property ; my decision has been given, and there is no more to be said."

To old Humphry's unspeakable dismay, it proved that there was indeed no more to be said to any purpose. Of course he said a great deal, urging how desirable it was for Robert Scarth's sake, for the sake of the estate, for Cuthbert's own sake, that effect should be given to intentions which only accident had frustrated ; promising also to bequeath the property either to Cuthbert or to Robert's eldest son, as Nigel might direct. But his eloquence produced no effect whatsoever, and he quitted the Abbey at length, a defeated and most dejected man. One small, yet far from easy, victory he did achieve, inasmuch as he did not visibly lose his temper ; nevertheless, Bailey, upon whose arm he leant as he emerged into the twilight, was well aware that he was in for a bad time of it with his master. It was never Mr. Trenchard's way to lose his temper ; but it was his way, when really angry, to indulge in the most cutting and wounding speeches that the heart of man could devise—speeches for which even a very handsome salary did not always seem to afford adequate compensation. What might be taken as some partial set-off against prospective discomfiture was to espy a tall female figure approaching through the gloom and to be able to announce in an impressive undertone, "Miss Dallison, sir."

Mr. Trenchard at once took off his hat, assumed a benign expression of countenance and cried :

"Is it possible ! My dear young lady, what can have brought you such a very long way off the line of travel upon which you started this morning ? "

"The same train that brought you, Mr. Trenchard, I suppose," answered Ethel coolly; for although this encounter was not particularly agreeable to her, she was resolved not to be scared by it. "And perhaps also the same errand," she had the temerity to add.

Mr. Trenchard thought that improbable, but felt sure, at any rate, that Miss Dallison was about to court a rebuff not less disconcerting than that which he had himself sustained. He said, shaking his head sorrowfully:

"You take it for granted, no doubt, that I came here in the hope of inducing Nigel to return to Rixmouth and lay life; but you are mistaken. I had no hope of the kind, and the talk which I have just had with him related to matters of business only. Possibly you may succeed in an enterprise which I did not even attempt. I can but trust that you will; for I fully appreciate the courage which has led you to—to——"

"To defy propriety?" Ethel blandly suggested.

"Well, let us say to disregard conventionality in a good cause. The only question is whether they will allow you to see him."

"Oh, they'll not allow her to see him," calmly struck in a familiar voice, at the sound of which old Humphry started and frowned; "they wouldn't allow his own mother, if he had one, to see him inside the Abbey, and he'll not stir beyond the walls, you may be sure."

For once Mr. Trenchard's habitual smile degenerated into an angry grin. He knew now who had forestalled him with Nigel, and his blood boiled at the thought of the unworthy deception which had been practised upon him.

"This is neither Birmingham nor London, Monsignor," he remarked.

"True for you," returned the priest composedly;

"but I was at Birmingham this morning and I'll be back there tomorrow. I'm as confident of that as I was that you would be here today, my dear sir."

There was a pause, during which Bailey smiled discreetly behind his hand, while Mr. Trenchard's grin became more accentuated and more hostile.

"I do not know," the latter resumed at length, "what your motives may have been for advising Nigel as you have done, Monsignor Nolan; but I will take it upon me to say that you have advised him foolishly. I do not think that the new owner of the Rixmouth estate will find his position quite a bed of roses. I have some little acquaintance with his tenantry, some little influence over them, some little power, and I am afraid that I shall not be able to place these at his service; for I strongly disapprove of Nigel's choice. I wish you good evening."

He raised his hat to Ethel and moved towards the hired conveyance, in which he was presently driven away, while Monsignor Nolan, laughing softly, remarked:

"The old gentleman must have clean lost his temper to make such a silly threat as that. Maybe he'll try to stir up strife on the sly, I wouldn't put it beyond him; but in the long run he'll find it to his interest to keep upon good terms with young Gretton, whom he can't seriously injure and with whom it won't be worth his while to quarrel."

"Mr. Gretton is to have Rixmouth, then?" asked Ethel quickly.

"To be sure he is; there was practically no one else for Nigel to nominate. Old Trenchard thought he had a chance, and he is so plausible that he might possibly have talked the young man over if I hadn't taken care to be here before him. As it is, he has lost his time and

his temper, both of which experiences are quite novelties for him."

Ethel scanned the shrewd, goodhumoured, smiling countenance which faced her. "I wonder," said she, "what you think I have lost, or am going to lose."

At this Monsignor Nolan became suddenly grave. "It needs no wizard, Miss Dallison," he answered, "to see what you are in danger of losing by your presence here at this moment. What you can have expected to gain by it I don't know."

"Contrive for me an interview of a quarter of an hour with Nigel Scarth and you will know," returned Ethel boldly. "After all, you must prefer him to Mr. Gretton. It will mean, at the very least, some hundreds a year for Church purposes during his lifetime."

Monsignor Nolan did not look shocked, nor indeed did he feel so, having been too many years a compulsory student of human nature for that. But he said :

"You misunderstand the case. There might be a chance, although I doubt it, if he were in love with you ; but you have never—saving your presence—touched his heart, only his senses, which you will never touch again. I don't think he would consent to see you, and, supposing he did, you would get nothing except an additional dose of humiliation."

"An additional dose ?" repeated Ethel, the colour mounting to her cheeks. Was this polite, debonair, yet covertly insolent priest acquainted, then, with the fact that she had already been humbled in the dust by Cuthbert Gretton ? Apparently not ; for his rejoinder was :

"Well, you see, Miss Dallison, you have placed yourself at the mercy of Mr. Trenchard, who is not a merciful man. I'll not betray you ; but I'd be sorry to answer for him."

"He may say what he pleases," Ethel declared, after

a moment of silence. "He can't harm me ; for I shall never see Yorkshire nor any of these people again. That is unless——"

"Ah, there's no 'unless' ! Mind, I'm not depreciating your power, Miss Dallison, I'm not saying that any man living could resist you if once you had made up your mind to conquer him. But even you cannot obtain victories over the dead, and Nigel Scarth is for all practical purposes a dead man. If I don't offer to bring you face to face with Brother Anselm, that is for your sake, not for his. You will travel by the night mail from Bristol to London, I hope, and"—he paused an instant before adding, "I shall not forget you in my prayers."

She turned and walked slowly away without a word. Her forlorn hope had failed ; she had lost the only man whom she had ever loved ; she had not even succeeded in cutting off her nose to spite her face and him ; she was going back, empty-handed, to the sordid struggles and indignities of exile ; perhaps she stood in as much need of Monsignor Nolan's prayers as any mortal could. But he was mistaken in the forecast of her future which escaped his lips, as he watched her tall figure vanishing into the early darkness.

"Nothing but a miracle," he murmured, "can save that woman from following in her father's footsteps and taking to drink. She doesn't take punishment well, the hereditary curse is bound to be in her, and she hasn't the vestige of a principle to keep her straight, poor soul !"

No miracle was wrought (unless the patient fidelity of an American millionaire ought to be accounted as such), and Mrs. Sol Wharton, who is so brilliant an ornament of society in New York, Paris and London, has never up to the present time been accused of

intemperance. It is said by some of her intimates that she is not a happy woman, although she has such excellent reasons for being so ; but there is very little doubt about the happiness of Colonel and Mrs. Gervase or of Mr. and Mrs. Cuthbert Gretton, while there is none at all about that of Father Anselm, who has acquired a certain celebrity as a preacher and missionary. As for Mr. Trenchard, he has almost entirely recovered the sight of one eye, which, as Cuthbert says, is much better luck than he deserves.

THE END

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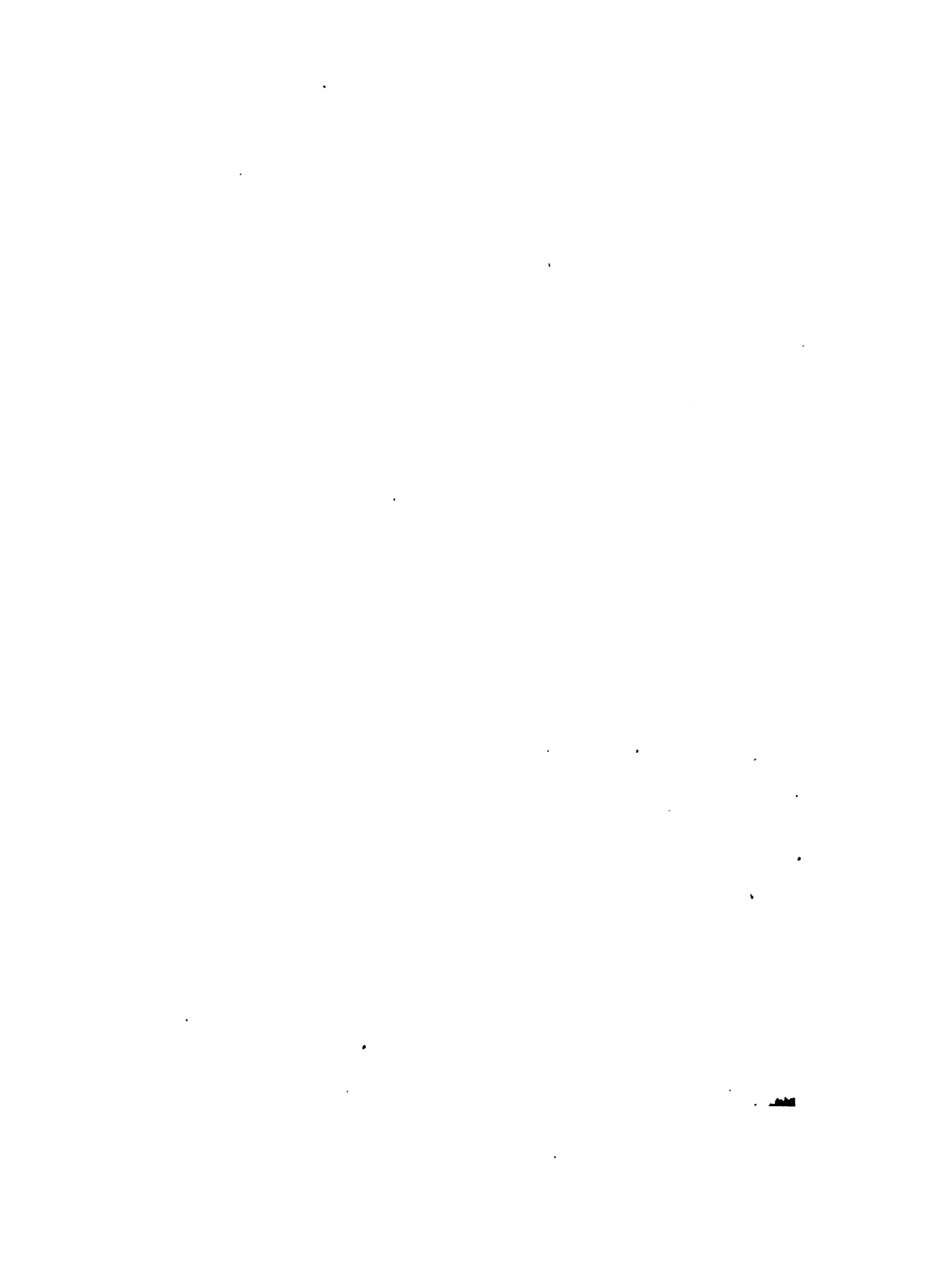
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